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## Culture in the online class

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## **Culture in the Online Class**

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Educational Technology

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## Abstract

This study investigates the construction of culture in a remote-accessed virtual class with learners who have been recruited globally. Having reviewed the literature of the field it concludes that using a framework of ideas which equates culture with nationality is problematic, as it tends to emphasise dissonance and difference in classes which are nonetheless functional. Instead the study proposes that culture should be regarded as a process of ongoing negotiation between the different elements involved in the learning context. In the online class this involves not only students, tutors and course materials but also the technology being used. In negotiation, human elements draw on understandings they have previously developed through prior experience of other cultural contexts (including nationality), whilst the understandings of designers and developers are reflected in the structure and functionality of the technology and the course materials provided for the class.

Using a methodological framework based on grounded theory a picture of the practice of negotiation of culture in an online class is developed. Posting messages to class discussion forums is found to be the primary means of negotiation of culture. Examples of discussions, and learners' subsequent reflections on them in interviews, demonstrate how issues are presented, and how and what authorities are drawn on to validate or dispute the positions presented. Core themes of technology, time, authority and control are identified as arising across different instances of negotiation. These are seen to introduce contradictions and uncertainties into the negotiation process, and thus potentially impede its effectiveness.

Overall, the study argues that the construction of culture in the online class is neither the product of essential attributes of the learners, nor a fixed linear process but, rather, an iterative process of multiple incidents of negotiation. Lessons learned over time provide material for future negotiation but cannot in themselves act as predictive tools. Some suggestions are made for the direction of future research aimed at giving participants more control over this process. Finally, suggestions are offered as to how this view of culture as negotiation can assist the facilitation of interaction and learning in the online class

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to Helen for enduring life throughout it and to Elisa for inspiring me to begin it in the first place

## **Acknowledgments**

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# Introduction

## 0.0 Context

The arrival of the global computer age and ever wider access to the Internet has been paralleled by shrinking ownership of the world economy. Castells (1998) notes that whilst directly employing only around 70 million people world-wide at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, multinational companies were nonetheless responsible for generating one third of the world's private economic output. Working practices have changed and with them the need for, and nature of, the education and training systems required to support them. 'Just in time' targeted short skills-based training has assumed greater importance for many employers than longer more formal programmes. The move towards a knowledge-based global economy (albeit one supported by generic skills in learning how to learn and how to adapt, Fuks et al., 2002, p. 23) has also served to spotlight the large proportion of the world's population that has no or limited access to education. Such inequality is seen as not only socially unacceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world but also as untenable since education has become essential for any kind of productive employment. Schools, colleges and universities are coming under increasing pressure to educate huge numbers of students and, furthermore, to educate them in terms of 'the global lifelong learning economy' (Taylor, J., 2001). This frame of reference holds 'flexibility' as its key as change becomes a constant: 'societies, organisations and individuals are required to change, to learn to change and to change to learn' (Edwards et al. 2002, p.200). Lifelong learning is seen as 'the dynamic adaptation of individuals, groups and organisations as a consequence of the compelling effects of dominant change agents' (Barker, 1999, p.16). The concept of 'a job for life' no longer underpins formal education systems. Technological developments are thus simultaneously creating a need for more knowledge, demanding technology-competent workers, and offering the means to provide such knowledge and workers.

Within this globalised world, the expansion of the classroom away from bricks and mortar towards facilitation on-line - via institutional intranets and, most recently, via the Internet - seems to offer answers to some of the most pressing issues in education at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; in particular, the need for wider access and the consequent need to deal with far greater student numbers than presently in face-to-face (f2f) education. In this context, online education is especially attractive because:

- of the ability of the Internet to 'let in' an apparently infinite number of users. Coupled with the technological advances afforded by wireless and satellite connectivity, this gives the possibility for any and all seeking education to log on and learn in whatever way they may individually feel motivated to do so;
- learning can be flexible and take place more or less anywhere, anytime; with the advantage that the learner does not need to leave home to find whatever subject, style or level they may be seeking. Asynchronous discussion fora further ensure that whatever hour of day or night the learner wants to learn, there will always be an environment where this is possible.

Even the most cursory of glances at website databases, such as the No Significant Difference Phenomenon Website (<http://nosignificantdifference.wcet.info/index.asp>) which offers comparative case studies of online and f2f classes, gives the impression that online learning is at least as good as, if not better than, that which is available face-to-face. Although, the scrupulous reader will note that many of these conclusions are based on impressionistic surveys, or pre-test/post-test studies of scientific or lab-based-psychology classes, e.g. Schutte (1997). Relatively little formal research to date has examined qualitatively the online learner experience, nor paid too much attention to the unspoken 'anyone' implicit in the adage 'anytime, anywhere' at the core of much of the marketing of online learning programmes. Although the research that has been done suggests that the move online may indeed advantage some of those who had not previously been able to reach, or maintain a positive identity once within, a f2f classroom, disadvantage is not removed by migration online: as we shall see, the loci of advantage and disadvantage merely change (Burbules, 2002). A seemingly shared online classroom may feel very different to each member of an internationally recruited group (Mavor & Trayner, 2003; Hewling, 2003) and, furthermore, despite sharing the same learning experiences, the participants' individual learning journeys and ultimate outcomes may be significantly different (Goodfellow et al., 2001- see 3.5.4).

Whereas in f2f learning institutions, tutors and instructional designers *might* be able to assume a degree of similarity in the prior learning of students in any one class (e.g. that they have pursued a common curriculum in school), this is not in any way certain in the globally recruited class online. And, whereas institutions (be they f2f or online) which restrict recruitment to those living close by *may* be able to plan for a reasonable homogeneity in learner needs and expectations (curriculum, assessment methods, etc.), this is certainly not the case when recruitment takes place globally.



Staff involved with the new electronic classes have generally responded to an increasingly culturally diverse learner population in one of two ways. Some have adopted the attitude that good teaching is good teaching wherever it may take place, and that whoever may be in receipt of that teaching should be able to process it as good learning as a direct consequence of its inherent quality. Others have attempted to 'version' online classes to meet the assumed shared backgrounds and needs of the new learner group. Much of the versioning work has been based on principles of cultural difference developed by business researchers such as Hofstede (2001) or Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (2000). Simply stated, these principles assume that the geographic origins or nationality or ethnicity of class members are primordial in determining the needs of any one individual student. Globally recruited classes, however, which potentially include participants from all five continents simultaneously, offer an interpretative challenge to teachers and students alike; a challenge beyond such categoric, mono-nationality-based principles.

## **0.1 The purpose of this thesis**

In the context summarised above, a very important issue arises: how culture is implicated in the globally recruited online class. Little research to date has sought to examine this issue in terms that go beyond nationality.

As a facilitator of online classes I have experienced situations where I felt instinctively that cultural issues were impacting on student interaction or performance. At times, and despite the online class being set up to maximise exchange and development of ideas, the resultant interaction was ineffective or lacking in depth or quality. For example, I had a couple of students who would only respond to questions posed directly by myself or another tutor, and a student who would always address myself or other tutors as 'Professor' despite this being stated as inappropriate. When it came to assignments, there was a student who would happily chat informally online about the advantages and disadvantages of practices in his teaching context but who would not reflect these in his written submissions. Yet another student felt that any discussion of her ideas was implied criticism of the fact that she was an army officer. Seeking an understanding of what I was experiencing, the guidance I found interpreted such incidents only in terms of generalisations about how individual behaviour could be explained by preferences and patterns attributed on the basis of nationality; e.g. that criticism of the ideas of a person perceived as a superior was impossible in a particular national culture. This was unsatisfactory since it assumed that classes were made up of

students with identical backgrounds and implied that the diverse groups I was working with could never interact to the mutual satisfaction of all parties. My classes *were* mainly functioning across and despite differences which theory suggested were problematic. What I was failing to find was an understanding of how they were able to interact, one that would allow me to capitalise on that successful interaction and encourage learning rather than explain why they should not, in fact, be learning. It is with a view to plugging – at least partially – the gap in understanding between theory and practice for those working in globally recruited online classes, that in this thesis I examine how culture is implicated in the online class.

As an initial response to my wish to uncover more of how culture was playing a part in my online classes I formulated the following questions to guide the first stages of the investigation:

- How is culture constructed in and by an online class?
- What are the critical cultural elements of an online classroom?

And, therefore,

- How does culture impact upon students' participation in online education?

As time passed and the research progressed I revisited these questions and refined them in light of my data collection and analysis. The final versions are discussed further in Chapter Three.

## **0.2 How the material in this thesis is organised**

Initially in this thesis I consider how equating the idea of culture with the concept of nationality may limit the usefulness of culture as an explanation of what is happening through interaction in an online class. I then look at alternative, less essentialist ways of understanding culture and explore how such ideas appear in the practice of student and tutor interaction online. Finally, I suggest how new understandings of culture may impact on efforts to maximise the effectiveness of teaching in transnationally recruited, remote-access, online classrooms.

In Chapter One of this thesis I examine the nature of virtual learning environments, the issues involved in using them and their significance as an area for cultural and educational research. I use ideas from research literature to situate and discuss themes which are central to this study. Chapter Two provides a conceptual review of the literature about culture, concentrating on alternatives to essentialist views. Chapter Three examines, critically, existing research into the

relationship between virtual learning and culture in order to provide a context for the research questions posed in this study. Chapter Four examines the methodology underpinning the study. Chapter Five describes the data collected and the process of data analysis. Chapter Six looks at the online classroom experience through students' talk, online and in interview, and Chapter Seven looks behind student talk to uncover crucial themes and key elements of online classroom culture. In Chapter Eight I summarise the research findings and discuss the research questions in the light of these findings. I further discuss the implications of the outcomes of this research for practice online, and conclude by providing recommendations for further investigation.



## Chapter One

### Why are virtual learning environments important?

#### 1.0 Defining a virtual learning environment

The 1999 Commonwealth of Learning (COL) report on a global evaluation of the development of virtual education notes that 'virtual education is an extremely dynamic phenomenon' (Farrell, 2001, p.1), implying that it is not easily characterised. Barajas & Owen (2000) define it as 'any combination of distance and face-to-face interaction, where some kind of space and time virtuality is present' (p.1). Postle (2002) describes a continuum ranging from a situation where the virtual element is 'supplemental or adjunct' (i.e. far from being the primary medium of instruction), through 'mixed mode' where instruction is both online and f2f, to 'wholly online' where no other medium of instruction is used (p.4). He notes that those virtual learning environments (VLEs) in the last category are few at present but increasing. Crook & Light, in 2002 placed emphasis on how few universities made any extensive use of virtual practices (p.154) but, only three years later, in 2005, Martin Dougiamas the originator of Moodle (only one of several major VLE software platforms) reported, in a presentation to staff at the UK Open University<sup>1</sup>, that there were already 7500 registered sites in 142 countries globally with 1.75 million students registered within these sites using 65 different languages. A little less than a year later, on 17 October 2006, Moodle.org<sup>2</sup>, the home site for Moodle recorded 17,091 registered sites. Amongst these 29 sites had over twenty thousand users each. In total 6,697,675 was the figure reported for total users worldwide, across 160 countries and using 73 different languages. This suggests that VLE take up and use is continuing to evolve rapidly.

#### 1.1 The design practice of virtual learning environments

In practice VLEs may exist, therefore, as adjuncts to f2f learning spaces, run parallel to them, or may be the only learning/teaching space afforded to a course, its tutors and learners. In the first case the VLE may simply be an intranet or network space, provided on a traditional terrestrial university campus, to allow e-mail and discussion board extension of f2f work. In the 'mixed-mode' format the online element of a course may either be accessed via a computer facility on a traditional campus or by remote-access via the worldwide web. Within any one programme some

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<sup>1</sup> 16 December 2005

<sup>2</sup> <http://moodle.org/stats/>

courses will be available either online or f2f or as a mixture of both. These mixed courses, usually known as 'blended', will often involve traditional tutorials, lectures etc., as well as a greater complexity of online activity than the simple extension activities offered in adjunct programmes. Online group collaborative work in the form of asynchronous discussions is a particular feature of blended programmes, the most favoured format for such courses although not the only way in which they can be organised (for a comparative study of f2f and blended learning, see Schweizer et al., 2003). This kind of collaborative discussion work is also central to remote-access, wholly online programmes where there is no f2f element in the learning or teaching of any course or programme, although extensive use of such features is being challenged increasingly by the use of object-based design elements. This design chunks learning activity into small parts, or objects, which have wider general applicability than just the teaching/learning context for which they were originally designed. Such objects are stored in electronic repositories from where they can be accessed and re-used or reversioned under open content licences. Increasingly, asynchronous communication in VLEs is supplemented by use of synchronous tools ranging from text-based chat to voice exchange and online telephony and conferencing. Such tools were not easily available at the time that data for this study were collected.

## **1.2 The remote-access VLE**

Broadly speaking, remote-access VLEs manifest themselves through a delivery platform (accessible on the World Wide Web via the Internet) which takes the form of password protected web pages created within VLE-specific software such as WebCT, Blackboard, First Class or Moodle. The delivery platform takes the place of what, in a f2f environment, might be referred to as the institutional 'bricks and mortar' and is the structure which offers entry to all aspects of the learning experience. Within the platform will be found communications, content, student, group, and resource areas, fronted by a page or so of core data identifying the subject, the study norms and other general class information (such as study guide, calendar and class list). Interaction will take place between the:

- a) learner and the content (via pages of course material, hyperlinks, etc.);
- b) learner and learner (via public discussion boards where students and teachers will discuss topics and tasks by means of asynchronous messages; or via e-mail on a one-to-one or one-to-group basis); and

- c) learner and tutor (via discussion boards, e-mail, and some kind of drop-box facility which allows exchange of assignment files between each learner and their tutor(s))
- d) learner and institution
- e) tutor and content.

Use of the worldwide web/Internet to 'locate' the remote-access VLE permits participation, theoretically at least, by anyone, from anywhere and at anytime provided that the (would be) user can get access to the technology required to go 'online'. In this way the remote-access VLE is liberated from many constraints of time and place in opening up access to education for all. The flexibility of the medium then allows it to deliver courses to widely differing numbers of participants on any one particular programme at one and the same time; this suggests that the remote-access VLE is an exceptionally flexible, cost efficient, teaching/learning tool inherently responsive to individual learner needs and wishes (Willems, 2005). It may also be effective for 'just in time' workplace-related training where a single, 'one-off' set of skills/knowledge is no longer assumed to fit individuals for the entirety of their working lives in a globalised economy and regular skills updating is required to keep pace with technological and economic change. Examples can be found across a range of industries from education to aero engineering from,

([http://online.amideast.org/onlinetraining/about\\_ot.htm](http://online.amideast.org/onlinetraining/about_ot.htm)) to (<http://www.aerolearn.com/>)

### **1.3 The VLE used in this research study**

The VLE in this study of how culture is implicated in the online class is a wholly online learning and teaching space accessed via the World Wide Web through a Blackboard delivery platform. The VLE content, teaching, etc., are provided by the host University, a terrestrial university geographically located in Australia and one which is well established as a provider of f2f programmes as well as print-based distance education. The facility to link pedagogical elements to administrative, managerial and technical support facilities is offered by an external technical provider. Together these services enable the provision of fully online programmes in education and business to a globally recruited student body.

There is no f2f element at all for students following programmes in this VLE. All activity takes place online, from enrolment to paying fees; from accessing course materials and tutorial support to interaction between staff and students; and onwards to student monitoring and assessment. In fact, the only offline communications between the students and the institution occur when the University

approves students' registration before the course, and at the end of the programme when they receive their end of year transcript and/or degree certificate.

The Blackboard platform in use for this study offers a number of distinct features:

- Text-based and (potentially) multimedia (audio/video) content and hyperlinked access to .pdf and off-platform external materials
- Hyperlinked access to online University resources, e.g. library, student handbook, University official documentation, etc.
- Asynchronous discussion boards - either whole group or sub-group
- Self-contained e-mail system
- Class and individual web pages
- Synchronous chat, via a 'Virtual Classroom' facility - either whole group or sub-group
- Dropbox facility for submission, return and monitoring of electronic assignments and recording of grades.

For teaching staff there are also a number of class management tools including an online grade book and access to statistical analyses of learner log-ins and online activity patterns. Learning activities for students generally include: study of online subject content; completion of activities, exercises and quizzes related to that content; and participation in asynchronous discussions by means of posting messages to themed discussion boards. Essay and project style assignments are also completed by participating students.

## **1.4 Ontological and epistemological issues**

### **1.4.1 Overarching themes**

VLEs are located in a new non-physical space created by a network of globally located computers communicating with each other in such a way as to create what is known as 'cyberspace' (Bell et al., 2004, p.50). Cyberspace has no apparent territorial or other physical limits and occupation or use of it may be seen as open to anyone who can access it. Likewise control of activity within it can be seen as determined by those using it, rather than by any political or national authority – notwithstanding the reality that some countries (e.g. China and Malaysia) do attempt to restrict their citizens' access to parts of the Internet at a local level by intervening technically to prevent content



being downloaded and by pressurising companies like Google to censor the information available to users.

The particularities of cyberspace do not entirely frame the context that is the VLE for, regardless of whether the VLE has its origins in a f2f educational institution or is an Internet-only online educational institution, it is usually a restricted space. It usually requires registration on the part of those who wish to use it and thus will have a frame of reference of some sort which will determine who can enter the VLE and how they may use it. Of interest in this study is whether this control process is implicated in the culture of the online class and, if so, how, since there is a tension between the idea that the Internet can offer access 'anytime, anywhere' and to anyone and the closed (i.e. password-protected) nature of the educational sites which exist within the Internet. Furthermore, in the f2f environment it is often possible to detect the influence of an institutional culture, for example through working practices and the comparative reputation of the qualifications offered, such that one institution may have a 'name' for theoretical study and another for applied study. Or, an institution may have a name for study in a particular field or for its style of teaching/learning delivery, e.g. the institutional culture of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge may be said to be particular in so far as they recruit not according to subject but according to places available in particular colleges. Institutional culture is also apparent online (Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005) and this present study sheds light on how this occurs in practice.

The VLE is also framed by being an *educational* environment as opposed to one created for any other activity. Recent research on the nature of community in a VLE indicates that relations between users are much 'nicer' (Conrad, 2002) than those in some other areas of cyberspace. It seems likely that this is partly because in the VLE the environment is perceived by users as instantiating cooperation, unlike, for example, areas of the Internet devoted to gaming or to role playing activities that seem to have a much higher expectation of, or need for, conflict. There is also much less scope for VLE users to assume 'alternative' identities than there is for those using the online environment for role playing games. Activity in a VLE tends to be closely moderated with unacceptable or disruptive behaviour quickly penalised. Although any grouping online which has education as its purpose might be thought of as a virtual learning environment, and thus perhaps be considered as a class, most often the term 'class' is used as it would be in a f2f context. That is to say, to refer to a group of students and tutors registered, through an institution designated as

having education as its purpose, and as a group studying a particular topic with a view to achieving a particular pre-agreed outcome. It is in this way that the term is used in this thesis.

The ultimate constraint on both VLE and non-VLE cyber activity is technology: that no such activity can take place without it. This may seem obvious but is far from simple. Research interest ranges from comparative studies of learning with and without technology (to be found collected on the No Significant Difference Phenomenon web site, referred to in the Introduction to this thesis – see 0.1 above), to the deliberations of philosophers such as Herbert Dreyfus, Charles Ess and Nicholas Burbules on the impact of technology. Technology-focused debates in education are not new but have resurfaced with the introduction of each successive new tool. They have concentrated, generally and as most famously exemplified by debate between Clark and Kozma, around the issue of the relative importance of the medium of instruction versus the way in which messages are presented. In 1983 this led Clark to take the view (subsequently extensively quoted and disputed) that the medium of delivery has no more impact on learning outcomes 'than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition' (Clark, 1983, p.445). Kozma refutes this stance arguing that different media have different effects on learning with some being better suited to particular subjects, or styles, than others (Kozma, 1991, p.179). As regards the arrival of the virtual delivery of education, much debate congregates around two ideas. Firstly, technological instrumentalism (technology as a value-free tool) and, secondly, technological determinism (technology as a force in itself) - although, as will be seen below, these are not always distinct or easily defined terms of reference.

#### *1.4.1.1 Technological instrumentalism*

Technological instrumentalism refers to an assumption that technology, presumably because it is not human, is somehow neutral, in culture and value: an 'empty vessel'. This is neither a new idea nor specific only to computer-mediated communication, and returns to the assertion by Clark noted above. The idea is also heavily refuted by many studies of practice. Warschauer, for example, points out that the technologies used by the students he followed (in a study of electronic literacies) could not be considered neutral, 'rather they were shaped by their historical designs and uses' (Warschauer, 1999, p.175).

Western values (especially those of the US as originator of most of the delivery software used in VLEs) may be said to be built into online learning systems. For example, norms of behaviour, such as expectations that staff and students will communicate freely, and 'appropriate' norms for assessment, underlie the design of discussion board and quiz features in VLEs such as Blackboard and WebCT. This may not only create ideological conflict for non-Western learners holding alternative values, but may also cause problems within groups of 'Western' users who simply do not share those ideologies. Chambers (2003), in the context of a UK Open University course, identifies a number of conflicts for users of computer-mediated communication (CMC). These learners may encounter, among other things, 'unfamiliarity with the social conventions governing students' interaction with their peers and teachers; unfamiliar with the procedures, educational requirements and norms of the providing academy' (p.261).

#### *1.4.1.2 Technological determinism*

Technological determinism is the view that 'technology and whatever effects follow in its wake possess their own autonomous power, one that cannot be resisted or turned by individual or collective decisions' (Ess, 2002, p.222). This view implies that since CMC seems to instantiate free speech, individual control, and a breaking down of the barrier of distance, this must inevitably mean that technology is leading to the creation of a global, democratic village. Ideas of the inherent empowerment capacity of CMC may seem to accompany this assumption and make it attractive to those who aspire to use CMC as an educational tool. However, practice suggests that the reality is somewhat different and technology is, in fact, susceptible to control by human will and inclination. CMC may be taken and adapted for use in particular contexts: 'CMC technologies are ambiguous...these technologies may lead either to greater or less democracy and equality, depending on social and individual choices – that is, on the social context of use' (Ess, 2002, p.226). In the introduction to a collection of case studies Ess and Sudweeks conclude that there are

... places where CMC technologies operate less as the vehicles for an intractable homogenization and more as catalysts for significant processes of hybridization, as individuals are able to consciously choose for themselves what elements of "the West" and their own local cultural identities and traditions they wish to hold to. This would suggest that the powers of globalization and new technologies are not absolute; rather, they can be

refracted and diffused through the specific values and preferences of diverse individuals and local cultures. (2003, p.1)

And, once again, Warschauer's study of electronic literacy in Hawaii reinforces rejection of any idea of technological determinism in the practice of online education. He notes that users can, and do, 'struggle to appropriate technologies for their own ends' whatever cultural backgrounds they may come from (Warschauer, 1999, p.175).

Debates around these two themes seem to confirm the assertion that 'possibly the most striking feature of the collection of current literature on Internet culture is the polarization of debate on almost every issue' (Macfadyen et al., 2004, p.12). However, implying that there are only two critical issues for consideration is an oversimplification. In preparation for the development of 'a cross-cultural perspective on the cultural consequences of the global use of CMC', Gayol & Schied detect 'four epistemological orientations to the impact of cyberspace on society' (1997, p.1). The first of these, which they label 'techno-rational', deals with the issue referred to above as 'technological instrumentalism'. The second and third coincide with, respectively, the positive and negative points recorded above in relation to 'technological determinism'. 'Techno-utopic' refers to the view that CMC has revolutionary potential as yet not fully realised whereas the 'oppositional' view '... expresses a profound concern about the negative consequences that technology has already had upon societies. This view also recognizes the impossibility of choosing a destiny outside the technological one.'(p.2). These three categories, Gayol & Schied state, accounted for almost all the literature available at the time of their survey. The remaining studies fall into a category they label 'critical', which 'refers to critical perspectives focused on particular topics but framed in global concerns such as gender, language dominance, nationalism, colonialism and culture, access and learning' (p.3). Furthermore, they determine that unless such a (critical) stance is taken CMC will simply extend power inequities found in f2f education into the virtual (educational) world.

Exploring issues of technology relative to how it accounts, or does not, for the perpetuation of power and influence is a lesser strand for other authors for whom a more profound issue must be explored:

The circumstances, conditions and the very *status* of knowledge, learning, teaching and researching are currently in a state of profound upheaval under the double impact of rapid

and far-reaching technological change and the massive assault on longstanding narratives of foundation and legitimation. (Lankshear et al. 2002, p.16)

This, according to Lankshear et al., will include the challenge of addressing 'the Internet's spatial 'ontology'.' (p.17), the very nature of what it is and, by extension, how its epistemological status is established. They note that the response to the Internet on the part of many in learning and research is to regard it as 'an elaborate infrastructure for transmitting, receiving and manipulating information' (p.17), what Burbules describes elsewhere as 'holder, manipulator, disseminator of information' (2000, p.35). Lankshear et al. prefer an alternative where

... we can envisage the Internet as a range of technologically mediated spaces of communicative practice that are amazingly diverse – a multiplicity of language games that are by no means confined to informing, and that are not best understood solely in terms of content. (2002, p.18)

However, they acknowledge that even this is a less than adequate conception since it ignores how information is packaged on the Internet and how the process of packaging is understood by sender and receiver:

... we need to understand the ways in which the relational aspects of the diverse kinds of practices and purposes played out there 'qualify and define what gets transmitted as content'. (p.19)

In relation to understanding these practices Lankshear et al. draw attention to:

- issues of what kind of knowledge is/will be considered important within formal education processes, e.g. the balance between transmitting factual knowledge, on the one hand, and imparting skills to enable learners to seek their own personally appropriate knowledge from a variety of sources on the other;
- issues of how knowledge is visualised collectively. Lankshear et al. suggest that prior to the arrival of the Internet knowledge was seen (in macro view) to form coherent subjects within a curriculum, and (at micro level) to be 'something that is carried linguistically and expressed in sentences/propositions and theories'. This can be seen, they suggest, as oppositional to the Internet view where knowledge is visualised as 'the radical convergence of text, image and sound in ways that break down the primacy of propositional linguistic forms of 'truth bearing' (p.32);

- issues of dealing with the volume of information available in terms of how, what and why to filter this to a measurable degree. This raises the question of how the value and meaning of knowledge may change (Burbules & Callister, 1997; Gilster, 1997);
- issues of how information and knowledge may be 'packaged' because of the authors' prerogatives rather than those of either the content or the receiver, bearing in mind that those using the Internet need to make the content they have to offer attractive to others;
- issues of how Internet information is presented and the effects of links and hypertext which 'force' reading in particular directions (Standish, 2000; Burbules, 1998).

Lankshear et al. conclude:

Our capacity to understand what will be involved in making informed and principled responses to the conditions of postmodern life in computerised societies will depend greatly on our willingness to problematise and rethink *both* the role and significance of knowledge and truth within existing and emerging social practices and social relations *and* some of our longstanding epistemological investments. (2002, p.35)

#### **1.4.2 Implications for this study**

Clearly the issues raised above impact on this study. However, some issues are more critical than others. In particular, how is working online perceived by students (and tutors)? Do they view the technical online environment as being an active or a passive player in the learning/teaching encounter, and to what extent is it seen as a cultural context in its own right? Perhaps it may be perceived as an extension of the institution it represents. Furthermore, the question of whether learners see anyone/anything else involved in the encounter as having cultural bias - this might include material provided by the course, or indeed the fact that content may not be provided by the institution but instead there may be a built-in expectation that students will seek this for themselves. And, it will be of interest how students deal with what may be termed 'interference' – ideas and activity that run counter to what they are expecting. This will also impact on how valid knowledge and authority are established and the place of students' own ideas therein.

#### **1.4.3 The characteristics of remote-access virtual learning environments**

In common with other learning environments, virtual learning environments feature: learners; subject content; tools; and those who facilitate the activities of the learners and use of the content and tools. However, the roles that those elements play may differ from those that they play in other learning environments; e.g. primary responsibility for delivery of course content generally passes

from teacher to delivery platform in online education. Largely text-based language is used to facilitate interaction between all of these elements, and time becomes a tool to manipulate them in new ways since this is primarily an asynchronous world. The permanence of interactional activity (at least for the duration of the course) and interpersonal exchanges in the VLE means that exchanges can take place over longer periods of time than in the f2f world. And, no words are 'lost' but, rather, since they appear as discussion board postings rather than as transitory spoken utterances, they may be *reviewed and reflected upon throughout later discussion in a way that is not possible in other learning environments*. In this way asynchronicity is posited as allowing learners to 'construct' knowledge *in what many believe is a more meaningful way* (Cannone-Syrcos & Syrcos, 2000, p.175). Collaborative working is made easy by the possible combinations of synchronous and asynchronous discussion across and despite physical and temporal distance (Postle, 2002, p.4); such collaboration supports what Lave and Wenger (1990) refer to as 'situated learning' and can therefore more accurately reflect patterns of workplace collaboration such as team working. Programmes can be organised more flexibly; 'classes' may have widely differing numbers in a way not possible in a f2f institution; learning can take place alongside full time employment; and programmes can be accessed 'wherever, whenever'. Organisations such as Western Governors University and Learndirect<sup>3</sup>, repackage programmes developed by other institutions on the basis that such repackaging enables learning to be better tailored to individual need and permits employment of techniques which better cater for individual learner preferences, thereby engendering deeper learning (Collis & Moonen, 2001, p.10). However, since the product resulting from the *repackaging of materials from other institutions* is nonetheless offered forward to many dozens, if not hundreds, of learners the degree of individualisation is actually very limited. I will consider ideas of the flexibility and adaptability of online learning further below.

#### 1.4.3.1 Online text as communication

Online education, like its offline counterparts, is heavily reliant on text, but it is text within an electronic environment, 'more plastic and malleable' (Kaplan, 2001). Hyperlinks and hypertext mean that sequence and structure are notably different (Reinking, undated), and there is a requirement for 'constant engagement with interfaces and ... code' (Kaplan, 2001). Kaplan further suggests that an 'electronic literacy' is required and that it must include 'the knowledge and skills required to make marks in an electronic age with electronic devices' (Kaplan, 1995). To alphabetic

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.wgu.edu/wgu/index.html> and <http://www.learndirect.co.uk/>

literacy, she notes, must be added an understanding of the workings of a computer and knowledge of how to make it produce certain outcomes. For Kaplan there are two distinct kinds of electronic literacy: the ability to 'make a mark' (the technical ability to make a contribution) and to 'make one's mark' (the ability to make the marks to get one's point of view across in an electronic environment). Whilst technically most VLEs do not require anything more complex from students than basic text documents with hyperlinks (as opposed to fully hypertext creations), text in the VLE has a communicative architecture that includes features beyond those associated with text in the f2f world. As Reinking notes, pure hypertext is only one form of what electronic communication has to offer.

Online students must acquire information seeking, interpreting and evaluation skills in order to 'combine literacy we've known for centuries with the new skills needed for an individual to thrive in the information age' (Koch, 2001). The new skills require concentrated use online to ensure their integration into practice - via what Tapper (1997) refers to as 'contextualised experiences' - although other researchers demonstrate that competence of this kind is not necessarily synonymous with success (Kirkwood, 2006). Semali (2001) equates literacy online as closest not to any alphabetic literacy but to Debes' (1968) definition of visual literacy, which has three elements focusing on 'discrimination and interpretation; creation; and comprehension and enjoyment'. Semali adds other elements to update the definition for an electronic age. It is interesting that he chooses a visual starting point for this understanding and in doing so hints at recognition of the semiotic aspects of electronic navigation.

Many definitions of what students need imply that in an electronic context literacy is something which goes beyond mastering the technical skills associated with computer use (what may be called IT literacy), to include an understanding of the effects and implications of technical skills in practice. Edwards et al. (2002) draw on literacy theory to provide an alternative view. They call up the distinctions made by Street (1984), who delineates two kinds of literacy: 'autonomous', literacy as a skill to be learned, and 'ideological', which 'recognises the diversity of literacy practices and how such practices can be understood only in terms of the specific contexts in which they exist' (p.203). Online students must be able to manipulate technology in terms of being able to make it work but, more importantly, they must be able to manipulate it in ways appropriate to the social and cultural context in which they are doing so.



### 1.4.3.2 *Online text as visibility*

In the f2f class students can be visible to each other even if they say nothing but in the online class they must speak through the medium of text in order to exist within the same class. In the virtual world nothing is apparent until it appears by actively making itself known - through the medium of the learning platform and in a form which can be recognised by those individuals participating in the virtual world, wherever they may be located. Generally, text or a computerised graphical format is used for this purpose. Language, in terms of interaction, thus becomes a largely written, text-based medium without gesture, look or bodily cue to accompany or elaborate meaning. Students and tutors alike do not 'appear' until they provide some textual clue of their existence to others who are also 'invisible' until making a textual sign. Online students may be shown on screen as names, or as numbers logged in to the delivery platform, but will not become anything more solid or 'visible' until they begin to interact by generating written words. As I have suggested elsewhere (Hewling, 2002, p.44), there can be no interaction until there is *textual* interaction. Text is thus of prime importance in the virtual class and it must serve multiple purposes. Text will document and store information, as it can in any learning situation, but it will also be the medium of communication of all thoughts and ideas and will be the physical manifestation of all bodies involved in the VLE. Inevitably, in comparison with other types of learning environment, this reliance on what may be termed 'text as visibility' will advantage some learners and disadvantage others in the VLE. The significance of this situation, and issues of language, especially of linguistic competence in the medium of instruction of VLEs, in relation to any investigation of culture are considered further in Chapter Two.

### 1.4.3.3 *The role of bodies - pedagogy*

The absence of physical people in the online class has, for some, raised pedagogical concerns. For Dreyfus (2001), embodiment is essential for learning. Learning is, he believes, an apprenticeship with seven stages; the last four of these – proficiency, expertise, mastery, and practical wisdom – require the presence of bodies in order for the learner to observe, and, under supervision, imitate expertise in action: 'without involvement and [physical] presence we cannot acquire skills' (Dreyfus, 2001, p.7). For Burbules, this is a narrow way to approach online education which calls too heavily on the idea that there should be equivalence between the online and f2f class experiences. He argues that,

... if certain aims are assumed to have an embodied component, then by definition online interactions can never fully approximate them. But, if the issue is seen not as the approximation of a particular cultural style, but as the invention of new ones, then it is an open question whether and how embodiment will play a role in them. (2002, p.390)

After all, he points out, the embodied learning environment is far from ideal for many learners, and, ... for many of these people the opportunity for interaction online, precisely because it does not require mobility or energetic effort, or precisely because it can be relatively anonymous, is preferable to ordinary embodied interaction ... the Internet is proving a fascinating zone of experimentation in how people can move beyond these embodied physical facts, not for the sake of "escaping" them, but for changing what they mean to us and to others ... they continue to affect us and our interactions, but in different ways, not necessarily inferior ways. (2002, p.392)

Notwithstanding the theoretical debate, in the current practice of online teaching some subjects previously considered as inherently and irredeemably tied to the face to face classroom and 'impossible' to teach online, are, in fact, being taught virtually. Most notably this is happening in medicine – including surgery and psychiatry (see, amongst others, Turkle, 1995). Projects such as PEARL (Practical Experimentation by Accessible Remote Learning)<sup>4</sup> are interesting in this respect because while using developments in virtual reality technology to enable physically disadvantaged students to gain access to f2f science classrooms remotely (learning such students could not previously access), they simultaneously challenge norms of how certain subjects 'must' be taught. When applied to VLEs, this new thinking can also offer new pedagogical perspectives for all students through the development of new 'cultural styles' (Burbules, op.cit.).

#### *1.4.3.4 The role of bodies - presence*

Fabri & Gerhard (2000) also note a need for some sense of embodiment online. However, unlike Dreyfus, they do not believe that this feeling must come from f2f interaction, nor do they see it as the consequence of a need to have learner and teacher face to face in order that learning may take place. Instead, they note the need for 'presence' (a feeling that one is not alone online) and 'co-presence' ('awareness of the existence of others within an environment') (p.43), within the context that 'the stimuli do not have to be a detailed replica of the real world' (p.41).

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<sup>4</sup> <http://iet.open.ac.uk/pp/m.cooper/PEARL/PEARL%20Project%20summary.htm>

Presence has been defined in many and various ways. Interest in presence has arisen from, and is sustained by, a desire to 'understand how people are influenced by media presentations' and an assumption that 'presence is central to the use and therefore the usefulness and profitability of the new technologies' (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Many authors (see Gunawardena, 1995) writing about presence in relation to computer mediated communication attribute the first definition of presence to Short et al.(1976, p.65) who define social presence as 'the salience of the other in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interaction'. This definition arose from work in organisational settings and investigation, by communication theorists, of the use of a variety of media such as fax machines and audio-conferencing, rather than from the use of computers (Rourke et al., 2001). It built on Mehrabin's concept of 'immediacy' (Mehrabin, 1969) which had drawn attention to the fact that interaction is enhanced by non-verbal behaviours, behaviours which 'new' media seem not to be able to transmit. How well a medium accommodates interaction is key to ideas of presence. Media have been assigned characteristics such as 'lean' or 'rich' (Daft & Lengel, 1986) according to how well they represent, or permit the appearance and transmission of, social and non-verbal clues during interaction. However, in the case of computer-mediated communication, this approach must be seen as of questionable usefulness since it ignores the ways in which actual communication practices may be varied by users (i.e. in the words they choose or the ways they write them), in order to overcome the apparent 'physical' shortcomings of the medium, or by use of 'emoticons' (textual representations of emotions, e.g. ☺ for a smile) to replace lost social cues (Picciano, 2002).

Rourke et al. (2001) investigating presence in online educational environments find three separate but intersecting types of presence within what they refer to as a 'community of inquiry' (COI):

- *social presence* – 'the ability of participants in the COI to project their personal characteristics into the community thereby presenting themselves to other participants as 'real people' '
- *teaching presence* – which has two functions: 'the design of the educational experience' (usually the responsibility of the teacher) and facilitation, which is a shared responsibility 'between the teacher and some or all of the other participants'
- *cognitive presence* – 'the extent to which the participants in any COI are able to construct meaning through sustained communication.' (Garrison et al., 2001)

Rourke et al. deem all three types of presence as essential for successful online learning, to a greater or lesser (unstated) extent. Other writers concentrate on the role of student impressions of presence, on the basis that these are important because presence is about perception - which varies from person to person (Picciano, 2002). In common with Rourke et al., Picciano's study implicitly links ideas of community and interaction to the way presence is experienced. As noted above, this implies a need for some feeling of the existence of others which transcends simply seeing a list of names of those 'online at the moment'. This theme is developed in the work of Tu & Corry (2001 & 2002), who see presence not so much as a matter of perception, but more to do with identity, and thus as fundamental to the idea that (again originating from the work of Short et al.) 'social presence is defined as the degree of awareness of another person in an interaction and the *consequent appreciation of an interpersonal relationship*' (emphasis added). This in turn is dependent upon 'social context, online communication and interactivity' (Tu & Corry, 2001). The apparently generic definition of presence provided by Lombard & Ditton (1997) - as the 'illusion of non-mediation' (i.e. giving the impression that it is reality and not mediated experience) - appears at first glance to transcend the complexity of dealing with differences between individual media. But this is not unproblematic since it fails to recognise that *all* communication is mediated, in one way or another, by language (Burbules, 2000) and, in the case of online learning, mediated via written language. Presence is important but just how important, on an individual basis, will vary according to a combination of factors. Presence may not be understood or felt in a consistent way by any one individual or group; indeed individuals may perceive it, or the lack of it, in different ways at different times.

Whatever definition of presence may be used, there are general conclusions across studies, ranging from business to education, to demonstrate that presence is either essential or desirable for productive interaction. There is also an understanding that it is, or should be, in some way measurable. Likewise it is implied that it is equally possible to have too much, as well as not enough of it (Rourke et al., 2001). Moreover, that too much or too little may influence learning. The quality of presence, in terms of how it may influence behaviour, is discovered in current research to be much less uniformly understood by users. Studies in education (e.g. Conrad, 2002), examine the nature and feel of the online learning environment and contrast the 'niceness' of the atmosphere in the online class with the aggression to be found in other online environments such as listservs (even those in education) and gaming areas. A study by Reynolds et al. (2004) goes

further, suggesting that dissonance amongst a particular group of learners was actively diffused by their shared, though largely unspoken, knowledge of and commitment to their fellow classmates. In research studies to date perhaps the most curious conclusion about the nature of, and need for, presence is that it is presented as experienced and understood universally across gender, language and cultural difference.

#### *1.4.3.5 The kind of learning and teaching in VLEs*

Some authors see the move towards online education as epitomised by the image of 'the sage on the stage' (i.e. the orator-type teacher, holder of all knowledge) becoming 'the guide on the side' (facilitator of learner self-discovery, knower only of how to get to know). This is said to be illustrated by the existence of discussion boards and virtual class chat areas online. It could be argued that the pedagogical debate around embodiment reflects reluctance on the part of some to move from one role to the other or, in Burbules' terms, to accept that different ways are not necessarily inferior ways. Although, when Dreyfus (2001), for example, asserts that embodiment is necessary for the ultimate mastery of new knowledge he is not suggesting a model of teacher as didact; rather, he is saying that real-time f2f experience of observing a master at work (i.e. practising that which has been mastered) is needed in preference to any mediated version of a master at work.

Although VLEs are in themselves somewhat closed environments their effective functioning depends on their location in the broader virtuality of the Internet. For some (as we have seen Lankshear et al. note, - 1.4.1.2 above), the Internet is simply a huge repository of knowledge and information; for others it is a context which offers 'an environment that instantiates collaboration' (Burbules, 2000, p.335) and a diversity of communicative practices (Lankshear et al., 2002, p.19).

The asynchronous nature of much communication and interaction in the global virtual learning environment has been noted above. This changes the nature of teacher/student relations online. Foremost, this asynchronicity permits communication exchanges over space and time as well as the option for discussion to be paused at the will of the learner (or tutor) for reflection and/or to allow time to be taken in composing interventions or responses. This facility advantages those users who may find the text-bound nature of the VLE difficult either because they are not fluent in the language being used or because they may not feel at ease with the technology. Asynchronicity is also offered, by the providers of online learning who include not just universities but also

vocational training providers, as a means of personalising learning programmes and thus of empowering learners towards learning that is tailored more adequately to individual need. In this way all learners are not automatically presumed to need to follow all parts of the same programme, nor obliged to undertake the same sections at the same time or pace as their colleagues. Likewise, assessment can be tailored in terms of criteria which make sense to them as individuals. The terms 'flexible delivery' and 'flexible learning' arise frequently in the literature (Willems, 2005, offers a review of this). Simultaneously, and in apparent contradiction to the emphasis elsewhere on the potential online for individualised learning, 'collaborative learning' is also offered as being advantaged online. Collaborative activity is possible because of the ability of the delivery platform to record action by students at any and all times, not just when all are online together in real time. In this way inputs from a group of students can be assembled into a joint endeavour even when they cannot work together simultaneously. Such collaborative working is seen as advantageous because it is perceived as preparing learners for the workplace where joint creative activity and teamwork are likely to be more appropriate than the pursuit of individual achievement, which is the focus of most educational programmes.

In the VLE, subject content material can be presented in a wider variety of ways than can be offered in most f2f learning environments and different audio, visual and other components can be held together in forms only possible by use of computers and virtuality. For inputs to function effectively, however, users need state of the art, optimised technology and fast reliable Internet connections. Users also need to be self-motivated and persistent when confronted with the unknown or the unpredictable. Many studies have investigated the role of technology skills and competencies (in terms of the roles they play) in the online learning experience (e.g. Tapper, 1997). Undoubtedly, to be an online student or teacher requires at least some computing knowledge and, arguably, some idea of how to collaborate asynchronously and in text. Some authors suggest that there should be minimum skills levels for entry to online classes, others that computing skills must be taught as a pre-requisite or as an integral part of online programmes. Authors such as Eastin & LaRose invoke the idea of 'self-efficacy', a term which can be defined as the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the actions required to produce given attainments (adapted from Eastin & LaRose, 2000), and they provide evidence that learners' understandings of how computer literate they are when they go online will influence how successful they are in achieving the required outcomes of the course. Specifically, 'self-efficacy is not a

measure of pure technical skill; rather, it reflects what individuals believe they can do with the skills they possess' (Eastin & LaRose, 2000). Its importance is indicated by studies such as Wang & Newlin (2002) which reveal a close correlation not only between self-efficacy and final grade but also a negative correlation between hours spent studying and final grade.

Studies investigating the nature of the teacher experience online show that this role comprises many parts and differs from that f2f (e.g. McConnell, 2006; Salmon, 2000). McConnell notes that the online tutor role involves also 'tutor as learner' (pp. 45-47). Bartolic-Zlomislic & Bates (1999) stress time as a key factor in being a tutor online - everything seems to take more time than f2f. And, at least at the beginning of online courses, much time is taken up troubleshooting students' technical and procedural problems. This raises the question of where the boundaries to the online teachers' responsibilities in facilitating students' experience in the online classroom may be situated. Another boundary issue arises in the matter of visibility (see 1.4.3.2 above). In particular, how far should the teacher be expected to go looking for the student who is enrolled but not actively participating in terms of textualising themselves into existence (i.e. not making themselves visible). Likewise, in an environment that seems to instantiate learner freedom and autonomy, how far should the 'lurker' (someone who reads the contributions to the class but does not contribute) be left to their own devices? In the f2f class the less participatory student may be observed and, if necessary, drawn into discussion or otherwise encouraged, but this is more complicated in an online class which technology permits to accommodate large numbers of 'disembodied' participants. Most VLE platforms offer 'student tracking' options to assist the monitoring of student performance but these are far from infallible, not least because they can only record action in terms of 'hits' to a particular location in the VLE not the activity (or lack of it) that takes place there (Hewling, 2004b).

## **1.5 Summarising the experience of learning online**

Wholly online VLEs afford universal access to learning 'whenever, wherever' – providing that students have a computer and a sustainable connection to the Internet. For some this access means simply the convenience of studying at home or at work rather than on campus (even if a local campus is within reach); at hours that fit more easily around other life commitments; and, possibly, with a greater opportunity for peer to peer interaction than is afforded by traditional paper-based distance education. For increasing numbers of geographically dispersed students, learning

in a VLE offers the opportunity to study programmes that are not only unavailable locally, but also programmes that are offered by globally recognised institutions. This in turn provides the opportunity for students to interact with peers from around the world without the need, expense, and disruption of physical relocation.

For teachers the VLE may offer the opportunity to facilitate learning in more flexible ways and at more flexible times than can be offered by the structure of f2f lectures and seminars within a 9-5 timetable within one particular set of bricks and mortar, although unless carefully managed this may also result in a greater tutor workload. Subject content can be delivered in a wide variety of ways, more or less teacher-centred/learner-centred. Web-connectivity permits students to explore alternative learning materials according to personal need, although new levels of advice to students may be needed to assist them in interpreting such sources of factual information. Students are no longer physical bodies within sight but are invisible unless sought out and engaged in textual technology-mediated exchange. Such interaction is no longer fixed to specific times and places but operates on a 24 hour clock - at times, and in volumes, which may or may not suit, or be in any way within the control of, the teacher.

Once in a VLE all students face spaces and places where there are few cues or clues as to who else is making the learning journey, even to the exact nature of that journey. This is, furthermore, a journey for which the route map and guidebook can only be created along the way by means of (largely asynchronous) text-based interaction, and a journey for which all travellers are differently equipped. Differences in learner prior experiences, styles and preferences for learning, and their beliefs about how learning is done exist as they do for students entering the f2f classroom but, whilst such differences may quickly become apparent f2f, they are much less visible in the VLE until made manifest through text-based interaction. Similarly, commonalities, such as gender, race and age, that are easily visible f2f, are inaccessible online until constructed through textual exchange.

Invisibility in the online classroom may be a positive advantage of the VLE when compared to the f2f classroom since it eliminates discrimination based on physical appearance, gender or race, etc. But, as Burbules has pointed out, whilst the loss of visual clues online may advantage some previously disadvantaged students, the asynchronous text-based nature of the online classroom



will also serve to disadvantage those with poor written communication skills who might previously have shone in a f2f learning environment. Disadvantage is not removed in the VLE, merely re-positioned (Burbules, 2002, p.393). From the point of view of the teacher, the invisibility of disadvantaged students may actually hinder the teacher's ability to meet individual students' needs.

There are other issues too to be confronted by students (and tutors) working in a wholly online VLE with no option of any f2f contact. The absence of 'social cues and clues' with which students frame their understanding of the learning journey they are embarking upon, relates as much to the knowledge they can have of the institution hosting their studies as it does to the nature of the human elements involved in the class. In the f2f environment visual or aural/oral clues as to the nature of the environment the students are joining assail them at least as soon as they set foot on campus. Wholly online students may have access to photographs of the institution they are joining but can have little idea of its total physicality, let alone its idiosyncrasies, norms and traditional practices. Tutor and institutional expectations of behaviours and style can only, possibly and incidentally, be constructed once class has begun and often only after the passing of events which were incomprehensible in the absence of such constructions. The extent and nature of the student body can only be guessed at, and, whereas in a f2f institution there *may* be some expectation that fellow classmates have had similar prior learning and life experiences, this is much less likely in the globally recruited online class.

In common with paper-based traditional distance education and in contrast to f2f environments, incentives, in terms of palpable encouragement from tutors, fellow students or others involved in institutional life, are few online. Framing encouragement or moral support will be difficult. Unless a participant in the class chooses to textualise feelings of joy or misery, absolutely no-one else in the class may know that this is a particularly good, or bad, day for any individual student or tutor, and indeed they cannot be certain whether or not the participant is even present in class. And, whilst in the f2f class students may see from body language or behaviour when another does not understand or is discouraged or angry, and can then respond appropriately, this is almost impossible in the wholly online class.

Wholly online students are not visible unless they choose to be so by making a written presence for themselves. Their existence in the class can only be acknowledged by a similar gesture on the part

of others since the act of acknowledging a presence is not visible to the originator when a message is simply read and noted by another. Unless a textual response is deemed necessary by a reader and is then actually posted, the originating student may well assume that they are being ignored. Marks of presence need also to be made repeatedly since, without an ongoing textual exchange, it is impossible to be certain that the other person is still present, let alone listening.

Even when a response is proffered, it may offer little encouragement if it is not from the person from whom the originator feels the need to be acknowledged - most often this will be the tutor. Focusing on support for individual students in need is easier in this virtual world because individuals' comments remain visible even as conversation moves on, and can be addressed later rather than running the risk of being forgotten. But, this brings new balances to be weighed too as to whether this should be done in full 'sight' of all other students via open forum discussion boards, or whether it is more productive/less intrusive to do so via one-to-one email outside of the class.

Discouragement can feel omnipresent online. The student whose message receives no attention in a f2f class may go looking for the person whose acknowledgement they need; this is much less easy online. The f2f student who cannot get their equipment to work may look around them and find another to assist, but the online student who one day cannot log-on to the institutional website may feel themselves locked out and lost for ever, especially when deadlines are looming and submission of a key assignment must take place online.

Prior experience of f2f or traditional distance education may offer the online student clues to understanding their new surroundings – or it may not. This is a new environment which shares common aspects with other learning environments whilst also doing seemingly familiar things in new ways. It is also territory which is peopled, notionally at least (since their existence is not always certain or substantial), by a diverse population, from places and times that may share common understandings – or that may not. The only shared, but often invisible, certainty is diversity, and that does not ensure efficacy.

## **1.6 Moving forward**

Accepting that online, as I have discussed above, learning can potentially happen 'anywhere, anytime' and that it may be accessed by 'anyone', it follows that learners in the globalised online classroom will come from a variety of backgrounds (national/geographic, professional, ethnic, etc).

This further implies that learners will arrive online with a variety of cultural experiences and understandings, including differing ideas of what learning and teaching may be, what learning and teaching may offer them, and what those activities may require of them as students. Likewise, ideas about tutors, the role of educational institutions and about whomever it is who designs learning and teaching will be involved in these understandings. In order to examine how culture is implicated in the globalised, remote-access, online classroom, therefore, it is necessary first to establish some understanding of the concept of culture. In Chapter Two I will look at ideas of culture and in Chapter Three will consider the extent of present understandings of the relationship between the two areas of culture and VLEs, in so far as they relate to this study of culture in the online class.



## Chapter Two

### Issues of culture and language

#### 2.0 Introduction

In Chapter One I examined the nature of virtual learning environments from the perspective of the current literature of the field, and discussed issues that arise in understanding their use. In this Chapter I will consider critically a range of understandings of culture in order to contextualise and situate them in relation to the online class in Chapter Three.

#### 2.1 Ways of looking: 'scoping the problem'

'Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams, 1983) and, 'there is really very little agreement on what people mean by the idea of culture in the first place. The word "culture" often brings up more problems than it solves' (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 2001 p.138). Despite this the concept is understood and used by all. Barker notes,

... there is no 'correct' or definitive meaning attached to it ... Culture is not 'out there' waiting to be correctly described by theorists who keep getting it wrong. Rather, the concept of culture is a tool which is of more or less usefulness to us as a life form. (2000, p.35)

But, until such a time as the concept is '... given usable content ... the term culture is empty ... completely circular as an explanatory tool' (Bond et al., 2000, p.50).

A number of options for 'usable content' (op. cit.) for the concept of culture (i.e. ideas about the meaning of the term), can be found in any dictionary. For example:

- the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)
- the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary).

Whilst offering broadly similar ideas, these two definitions differ considerably in their focus and specificity. It is clear that culture seems to involve a collection of people who form a distinct group. In common in both definitions are ideas and beliefs, and the notion that these should be shared by the people involved. There is consensus neither on exactly how to determine who should be included in any one grouping, nor what might be fundamental criteria for membership (or creation)

of that group, beyond the notion of shared ideas and beliefs. Neither definition makes it clear the exact nature or substance of the shared beliefs and customs. More fundamentally, one definition suggests that the ideas and beliefs involved may be fixed whilst the other makes clear that the definition of them pertains to a certain (unspecified) period in time. However, interestingly, the first definition – which does not mention time – is offered in parallel with a further definition of culture:

- the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties especially by education (op.cit.)

By using the concept of 'developing', i.e. not fixed or stationary but evolving, the ideas of time and process are added. However, none of the definitions offers any idea of place or space in relation to the groups it refers to. One final definition of culture, more narrow in scope but perhaps more frequent in popular usage, is noted by the dictionary: the idea of culture as the product of art, music, and literature, etc. – 'high' culture. Here culture is the result of intellectual creativity and endeavour within a specific group, but over and above the realm of routine or mundane daily activity. This definition is not distinct however, from those discussed above:

... there is some practical convergence between (i) the anthropological and sociological senses of culture as a distinct 'whole way of life', within which, now, a distinctive 'signifying system' is seen not only as essential but as essentially involved in *all* forms of social activity, and (ii) the more specialized if also more common sense of culture as 'artistic and intellectual activities', though these, because of the emphasis on a more general signifying system, are now much more broadly defined, to include not only the traditional arts and forms of intellectual production but also all of the 'signifying practices' – from language through the arts and philosophy to journalism, fashion and advertising – which now constitute this complex and necessarily extended field. (Williams, 1981, p.13).

These definitions are useful in providing an overall understanding of culture for a general readership, and for everyday use, but they fall short of substance for the purposes of this study. The roots of these general definitions lie in a number of fields, most notably anthropology. These fields of knowledge and the potential they offer for examination of how culture is implicated in the remote access online classroom are explored further in the remainder of this Chapter.

## 2.2 Anthropology-influenced definitions of culture

### 2.2.1 Kluckhohn to Hofstede

Anthropology, being the study of man and humankind, offers no shortage of discussion of what might constitute meaning for a concept of culture. Bond et al., in framing 'usable content' for their own investigation of cross-cultural discourse (2000, p.50), identify Kluckhohn as the most widely quoted author. They find his 1952 definition useful because of its inclusion of 'values' in the list of terms to be considered:

Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. (Kluckhohn, (1952) cited in Bond et al., 2000, p.50)

Kluckhohn's analysis of the concept of culture has profoundly influenced the development of research and thinking about culture as an idea: with widely differing outcomes. In terms of its influence on the relationship of culture to online learning, Kluckhohn's influence materialises most forcibly in the work of Geert Hofstede. Hofstede, in his work 'Culture's Consequences' (2001) draws on the work of Kluckhohn to arrive at what he refers to as 'a shorthand definition' of culture:

... the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. (Hofstede, 2001, p.9)

At the heart of this 'programming', he determines, are 'values', 'symbols', 'heroes' and 'rituals'. Values are at the centre of an 'onion diagram' with the other three elements forming layers around them. Identity, being a matter for individuals (who may assign themselves, or be assigned to, more than one identity), arises from 'practices' which depend on 'mutual images and stereotypes and on emotions linked to the outer layers of the onion' (p.10) Culture, as a concept, 'is usually reserved for societies (operationalised as nations or as ethnic or regional groups within or across nations)' but may be used to describe 'any human collectivity or category: an organisation, a profession, an age group, an entire gender, or a family'. But, he adds, 'societies' are 'the most "complete" human groups that exist', and are therefore of greatest significance. Societies may include different ethnic groups but, Hofstede asserts, these groups will usually share 'common cultural traits with one another that make their members recognizable to foreigners as belonging to that society' (p.10). Thus, culture, and cultural identity are operationalised in the form of nationality (i.e. the manifestation of national norms), which is seen by Hofstede to predominate over individual

difference or preference. In the context of this study, these ideas imply a contradiction since they suggest that the online class, as a 'human collectivity or category' (op.cit), may constitute a culture in its own right and yet, equally, cannot be seen as such if it includes members from a variety of national backgrounds. There would seem to be no way of reconciling these two positions; what actually happens in practice is seen in this study.

Hofstede's initial 1973 study examined the attitudes of IBM employees across more than 40 geographic nations. In 1983 he extended the study to more than 50 locations. The spread of countries surveyed, by means of questionnaire, was wide but not altogether comprehensive since it excluded 'most of Africa and the communist countries such as the then Soviet Union and its satellites (such as Hungary and Poland), China and Cuba.' (Stainton-Rogers, 2003, p.171).

Hofstede's (2001) investigation led him to identify five independent dimensions of national culture, 'each rooted in a basic problem with which all societies have to cope, but on which their answers vary' (p.29). The dimensions are:

1. *Power distance* (PDI) – 'which is related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality' (p.29)

A high power distance ranking indicates a high degree of difference in power and wealth between individuals in a nation. A low power distance ranking indicates a more egalitarian distribution of power and wealth and greater equal opportunities.

2. *Uncertainty avoidance* (UAI) – 'which is related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future' (p.29)

A high ranking indicates a society where rules and laws are many. A low ranking indicates a nation where ambiguity, risk and change are well tolerated.

3. '*Individualism versus collectivism*, (IDV) which is related to the integration of individuals into primary groups' (p.29)

A high individualism ranking indicates a nation where the individual's rights predominate. A low ranking indicates a collectivist society where the collective good



takes precedence, and family and community ties and responsibilities are more strongly valued.

4. '*Masculinity versus femininity*, (MAS) which is related to the division of emotional roles between men and women' (p.29)

A high ranking indicates that males dominate in society. A low ranking indicates less discrimination between the sexes.

5. '*Long-term orientation* – is related to the choice of focus for people's efforts: the future or the present' (p.29)

A high ranking on this dimension indicates a culture that concentrates its efforts on long term reward for effort, e.g. in work. A low ranking indicates less attention to tradition and a focus of effort on present outcomes.

The first four dimensions arose from Hofstede's initial 1973 study. The final dimension was added as a result of input from, and discussion with, the authors behind a group called the Chinese Culture Collection (CCC). This group was concerned that other studies of culture had used instruments which were highly ethnocentric and did not take account of values deemed important in Chinese Confucian thinking. Indeed, as noted above, China was one of the populations left out of Hofstede's study (although, somewhat ironically, this was actually a consequence of its position as a *communist* state). The CCC group set out to redress the balance and published its own study of national culture in 1987. The group arrived at four dimensions, three of which were 'significantly correlated with' those of the IBM study (Hofstede, 2001, p.71), and a fourth which was not. This latter dimension was concerned with Confucian work dynamism. It was the re-examination of previous data in the light of this dimension, along with examination of data on the gross national products of the different countries within his sample, which led Hofstede to add his fifth dimension.

From the data collected in the countries surveyed by Hofstede, two main clusters appeared. One cluster featured countries where average values were high on individualism and low on power distance. In the other cluster average values were low on individualism and high on power distance. The first cluster included North America, much of Western Europe (including the UK) and Australia and New Zealand. Nationals of these countries were seen as having a strong

individualistic focus combined with a lack of deference to superiors. The second cluster included mainly Latin American and Asian countries. Nationals of countries in this cluster were seen as holding values which were both highly deferential and collectivist in orientation. Even allowing for the fact that Hofstede was surveying a corporate environment well known for its particular institutional 'culture' and the fact that the survey concentrated on 'white collar' (i.e. non-manual) workers, it is remarkable that the results were so marked (Stainton-Rogers, 2003, p.172) in the categorisations that they produced.

Although Hofstede's original data was collected in 1973, he reported in 2001 that subsequent re-evaluation of that data, and more recent additions to it, indicated that 'cultures, especially national cultures, are extremely stable over time' (Hofstede, 2001, p.11). This suggests that assumptions made on the basis of his study are reliable, valid and of continuing usefulness. This assertion of stability over time is particularly interesting. It runs contrary to the reality of the increasing global mobility of large numbers of people across well established national boundaries by suggesting that this realignment of populations has little effect on the practice of culture within those boundaries. It also leads to the curious conclusion that time, in the form of history, has in the past played a part in the evolution of cultural dimensions but somehow its effects, and thus changes in the profile of particular societies, have now ceased. Hofstede points out that studies comparing his 1973 data with data collected more recently show little change in dimension rankings. He further suggests that, except for societies which experience 'extremely dramatic outside events' (p.36), his cultural profiles will be stable over at least 50-100 years and 'there is no reason they should not remain recognizable until at least 2100' (p.36). This is hard to believe unless national shared social attitudes are changing much more slowly than legislation, let alone practice. Further cause for scepticism is offered by the results of recalculations of national profiles after the break-up of Eastern Europe which I discuss in more depth at 2.3 below.

Hofstede's work is not without its critics (e.g. McSweeney, 2002) but has been widely quoted and used as a frame of reference for examining situations in which culture is implicated or under investigation. On the basis that it provides a seemingly causal link between culture (in the form of national identity) and behaviour, Hofstede's work has had a profound effect on recent research into culture (Morse, 2003, p.40). Chiefly his ideas have been applied to studies of business environments and practices – since his data came from a business context – but they have also

been used in education. Significantly for this present study, they have generated a considerable amount of interest in relation to the design of VLEs; and such studies are examined in detail in Chapter Three. Hofstede's approach to culture as a fixed, nationality-based concept has also been used extensively in the process of course 'versioning'. Versioned courses share common content but different versions are produced for use in particular countries or regions, in response to perceived local needs and preferences. Hofstede's dimensions are often used to interpret these local needs. For designers, a fixed number of dimensions offers a practical solution to the problem of managing the otherwise complex detail of individual preferences.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2.2 Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars

Culture and nationality, understood in terms of shared values and beliefs, also inform the work of Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars (2000), who, like Hofstede, drew their study sample from a business population – forty-six thousand managers in over forty countries - and concluded with 'at least' six linear binary oppositional dimensions of culture (p.11), which are detailed in Figure 2.1 below.

1	<i>Universalism</i> (rules, codes, laws and generalisations)	<i>Particularism</i> (exceptions, special circumstances, unique relations)
2	<i>Individualism</i> (personal freedom, human rights, competitiveness)	<i>Communitarianism</i> (social responsibility, harmonious relations, co-operation)
3	<i>Specificity</i> (atomistic, reductive analytic, objective)	<i>Diffusion</i> (holistic, elaborative, synthetic, relational)
4	<i>Achieved status</i> (what you have done, your track record)	<i>Ascribed status</i> (who you are, your potential and connections)
5	<i>Inner direction</i> (conscience and convictions are located inside)	<i>Outer direction</i> (examples and influences are located outside)
6	<i>Sequential time</i> (time is a race along a set course)	<i>Synchronous time</i> (time is a dance of fine co ordinations)

Figure 2.1 Summary of Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars oppositional dimensions of culture

<sup>1</sup> From Hofstede 2001, p 71: 'One should realize that dimensions do not "exist". Like "culture" itself, they are constructs, products of our imagination, that have been introduced because they subsume complex sets of mental programs into easily remembered packages. In a classic essay, Miller (1956) has argued that "the magical number seven, plus or minus two," represents a limit to the human capacity for processing information. Models of culture with more categories will no longer be felt as useful; they do not make reality simpler.'

In their more recent work the authors note that 'cultures have always been reflections of the world mirrored in the eyes of members. Who is to say where we should look first, or in which direction our eyes should scan?' (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000, p.1-2). Accordingly, there is no 'normality', just difference, which is based on initial (i.e. historical) decisions by different groups. Understanding culture therefore depends on an ability to 'perceive and think in both directions' (p.3). This recent work relates culture to wealth creation and business success and needs to be viewed from the perspective of the business world where the building of teams is critical. Team (i.e. collaborative) working is also important in the online classroom but, whereas a workplace team may need to be balanced in order to work together, their ultimate 'raison d'être', in terms of outcomes, is assessed collectively – not something which, generally, can be said of learning environments where assessment systems will seek to judge only individual performance, albeit at the conclusion of collaborative activity. In an online classroom using a model of culture as proposed by Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars would require taking into account this particular view of how "success" may be determined.

### **2.2.3 Edward T. Hall**

Somewhat different from Hofstede and Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, but nonetheless taking as its baseline the idea of nationality as the unit of cultural analysis, Hall's (1959, 1966 & 1976) focus is directed towards how different cultures practise communication. Hall places nations on a continuum between 'high' and 'low' context. In practice, he states, high context individuals may be identified as obviously less focused in speech. Speech is unhurried and provides a whole context, its purpose is not governed by the asking of questions nor by positioning which anticipates or expects a particular response. Conversely, low context individuals are seen as much more direct, seeking information and/or expecting a particular response. Interruption or deviation from the point, in a low context culture, is considered inappropriate. For Hall, communication is highly dependent on understanding positioning and space and this requires a social environment where body language and physical gesture and activity are clearly visible.

Applied to education, ideas of 'high context' and 'low context' communication have implications for how learning is presented, experienced and interpreted:

Culturally diverse individuals may hold widely different expectations of how to establish credibility, exchange information, motivate others, give and receive feedback, or critique or evaluate information. (Reeder et al., 2004, p.88)

CMC's reliance on all interaction taking place through text and, consequently, its reliance on complex encoding/decoding processes suggests for Morse that the online environment privileges users coming from a 'low' context culture (2003, p.41) where exchanges will be focused and direct. However, this view is problematic since it implies that not only do all participants from 'low' context cultures share the same interactive processes but also that a preference from f2f will transfer directly online.

### **2.3 The (un)helpfulness of nationality-based and other essentialist ideas of culture**

Hofstede, Hall and Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars all offer interpretations of 'culture' that can be used to look at students in an online learning environment from the point of view of how their behaviour there may be a consequence of their cultural (i.e. national) background. The 2002 study, by Kim & Bonk, for example, considers the asynchronous discussion board behaviour of three distinct national groups of undergraduate education students within a joint interactive environment. Students were enrolled in conference groups according to nationality but were also able to interact in the discussions of other nationalities. The results of this study, as reported, demonstrate that students from the US, from Korea and from Finland behave very differently in the 'same' classroom; their attitudes and patterns of behaviour are different, as are their contributions to the class discussions and their general interaction patterns. Kim & Bonk conclude:

Korean students were more social and contextually driven online, Finnish students were more group-focused as well as reflective and, at times, theoretically driven, and U.S. students more action-oriented and pragmatic in seeking results or giving solutions. The U.S. and Finnish students spent much time sharing knowledge and resources and also providing cross-cultural feedback. (Kim & Bonk, 2002, p.2)

These outcomes are arrived at by looking at students' interaction only in terms of the national group in which they were placed; no analysis is offered of any comparisons between individuals within any one national group. Thus, for example, US students are said to be more cross-culturally active because they posted an average of twice as many messages to the Finnish discussions as

did the Finns to the American discussions. The possibility that numbers of cross-discussion postings might vary within the members of any one national group is not reported on.

Likewise, using Hofstede's idea that institutions are manifestations of national culture in practice (2001, p.10), it is possible to surmise that not only will students from different national backgrounds behave differently in the online class, they will probably also react differently to the VLE itself if it does not originate in their 'home' country. Combined with the premise (from Hofstede, Hall and other 'essentialists') that students from the same geographic, i.e. national, background will share common behavioural norms, this idea provides the basis on which 'versioned' courses are developed. In versioned classes, where students are deemed to share a common national background that is not that of the learning provider, the course materials and presentation are modified to make them more accessible and relevant to the location in which they are to be used. Versioning may involve adding or substituting local material, changing icons to reflect local norms – for example, substituting drop down menus for icons (Van den Branden & Lambert, 1999, p.256) - the aim being to reduce dissonance between learners' expectations and their actual experience of the course.

However, versioning is also problematic. By assuming homogeneity in any one national group, it denies the possibility of recognition of individual differences within the group. Chase et al.'s (2002) study of a Canadian class is interesting in this respect – individual student behaviours varied widely but the members of the class, as Canadians, were apparently a homogeneous group (in Hofstedian terms). Individual differences were not, in terms of how students' behaved in class, subsumed into the broader pattern of national culture as might have been predicted, but were visible in terms of what they said and who they spoke to. This is not a unique study: Morse (2003) offers New Zealand as a context sharing a similar profile, i.e. a population with diverse ethnic origins. Increasing cross-border movement of large numbers of people around the world implies that these cases are not unusual.

Similar issues arise with regard to the differences in educational background within any mono-cultural group. By nature of being remote-accessible and therefore open to students from places where localised (f2f) study options are not available, the online class actively seeks to engage a diverse range of participants. Students will not necessarily share common educational

backgrounds, even if those students share a common nationality. Ideas of flexibility and open learning also widen the student base for online learning since they encourage participants from a range of academic backgrounds by giving entry to classes on the basis not just of previous formal education achievement, but also on the basis of previous life and work experience.

Generalisability and assumed homogeneity are also problematic where classes feature students from a number of mono-cultures which apparently all share cultural commonalities. Where, for example, this involves sharing a high ranking as individualistic or collectivist cultural understandings and behaviour vary nonetheless. The 'Cultura' project (Furstenberg, Levet et al., 2001) offers one example where an online class was used for collaborative work between American students learning French and French students learning English. Using a Hofstedian analysis both countries have high rankings for individualism (although the US ranking is exceptionally high) but students' interpretations of social situations represented in the materials they were studying varied widely. Hofstede's model suggests that this is explained by the high affiliation of French nationals to Catholicism such that, in addition to the relatively high ranking for individualism, the country also scores highly on the dimension of uncertainty avoidance. A study of Internet communication tools by Thorne (2003) also, co-incidentally, includes three case studies of US/French students working collaboratively on line which indicate similar communication problems to those in the Furstenberg et al. study. In all of these cases profound differences in beliefs were demonstrated as operating behind apparently shared use of concepts and ideas:

... behaviour is unique within each culture and, at the same time, there are systematic similarities and differences. ... There are general patterns of behaviour that are consistent with I – C [*individualism – collectivism*], but I – C is manifested in unique ways in each culture. In the Japanese culture, for example, collectivism involves a focus on contextualism ... Other collectivistic cultures emphasis different cultural constructs as part of their collectivistic tendencies (e.g. Latin cultures emphasize the family, African cultures emphasize the community). Understanding communication in any culture, therefore, requires culture-general information (i.e. where the culture falls on the various dimensions of cultural variability) and culture-specific information (i.e. the specific cultural constructs associated with the dimension of cultural variability). (Gudykunst, 2000, p. 295)

This implies a much more complex picture for understanding culture than simply five dimensions; the interplay and relative rankings of those dimensions effectively adds further 'dimensions' for consideration.

Other authors reference groups of students from multiple mono-cultures in terms of how philosophical approaches to life may influence behaviour in education. For example, attention has been focused on students with Confucian heritage suggesting that a different learning style can be determined and used to frame education experiences for these students (Barron & Arcodia, 2003 and Barron, 2004). However, whilst this may be a useful approach when there is a Confucian heritage for all the students in the group it dismisses, as does versioning, other individual differences as being in any way pertinent. More importantly though, in a globally recruited class there will also be non-Confucian heritage students. The issues around dealing with culturally hybrid groups have been approached in research by Schwartz et al. (1994) who, concerned that Hofstede's dimensions of culture might over simplify understanding cultural difference, used the findings of Hofstede and others to identify 56 values operating, to some degree or another, across eastern and western cultures. These were used to formulate a questionnaire which was then used to collect data in 60 locations globally. Results showed that whilst individualistic (I) and collectivistic (C) groupings were apparent, there were also significant differences in the way that individual cultures demonstrated the same overall characteristic. Individualism, for example, had three variants:

- US – features independence; self-directedness; daring; capability; ambition and success
- UK – features excitement, hedonism and diversity
- European – features curiosity, creativity and broad-mindedness.

Depending on what might be required of any cross-national grouping which includes representatives of these three orientations, interactivity between members might achieve its purpose, or it might not.

Returning to Chase et al.'s Canadian class and using Schwartz et al.'s more complex version of culture as nationality, it is clear that there are, in fact, several sets of cultural norms (as in national patterns) at play in their class. The norms of being Canadian are co-located with the norms of the national identities, acquired from parental/family influences and so forth, within which individual students live daily whilst also being Canadian. This is not just an issue affecting First Nations



Canadians. A very high percentage of Canadians have one or both parents who were born outside of Canada and, furthermore, the identity of 'Canadian' includes association with two languages and cultures, French and English. Schwartz et al. offer a more complex interpretation of 'Canadian' than Hofstede but it still falls short of accurately representing the cultural affiliations of any one person who, equally, associates themselves with the nationality 'Canadian'.

The phenomenon of multiple national affiliations within any one individual is not unique to being in the online class. First generation Chinese pupils in Manchester were found to be fluent in both English and Cantonese and 'well adjusted to living "between two cultures"' (Woodrow & Sham, 2001, p.393). 'They appeared to live in the same classrooms, in terms of how they described them, but their behaviour and feelings and preferences within those classrooms ... were different' (p.379) and resembled Chinese educational norms far more than British ones. The idea of individual student nationality as an explanation of how culture influences the online class for any one student is, to say the least, an over simplification. As Campbell comments:

In culturally diverse societies, the phenomenon of belonging to more than one cultural group and moving between such groups is no longer unusual. It is possible to wear the badge of civic symbols of cultural identity such as citizenship, while at the same time identifying with one or more specific cultural group within a nation (Gunew, 1998). These cultural identities are not mutually exclusive. (Campbell, 2000, p.32)

To reinforce her argument Campbell offers case studies from South Africa, Canada and Australia and, although she offers these principally in support of her assertion that such multiculturalism is not a barrier to success in mainstream education systems, it is interesting that she notes in her conclusions that 'cultural code switching' is actually widely practiced:

... many people, from business executives, tourists and students to immigrants and refugees are doing so on a regular basis. ... The ability to adapt quickly and effectively to unfamiliar cultural environments is becoming one of the key skills demanded by an internationalised economy and rapidly changing domestic social contexts. (Campbell, 2000, p.37)

Curiously, despite seeming to suggest that national profiles based on five dimensions have meaning for all nationals of any particular state, Hofstede does also offer some data which call this

assertion into question. From data collected in 1971 he produced a profile for Yugoslavia. He recalculated this profile in 1993 in light of the country's break-up into three states:

The scores of respondents from the three republics were by and large quite similar; all showed high PDI and UAI, low IDV, and medium to low MAS. Comparatively, however, Serbia had by far the highest PDI and the most extreme scores on the other three dimensions as well (highest UAI, lowest IDV, highest MAS). Slovenia scored remarkably feminine. (Hofstede, 2001, p. 65)

Since the data did not change over time clearly the original profile masked considerable individual difference.

The problematic nature of using an essentialist frame of analysis for looking at culture, such as that proposed by Hofstede, lies in the unit of analysis - 'cultures do not talk to each other, individuals do' (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p.138) - and, as individuals operating in a small group, the chances that any one person may both affiliate themselves with a single national culture and do so in the way suggested by Hofstede's profile for that nation will be very small. There will obviously be differences in learner experiences of the online class which could be associated with generalised nation-based phenomena (e.g. understandings of the role of the tutor drawn from a particular nationally shared experience of a particular education system), but assuming homogeneity on all issues on the basis of agreement on one (i.e. nationality) is not helpful. Nationality-based ideas of culture lead to a view of the online class as a multiplicity of mono-cultures, and investigating cultural implications then becomes a matter of comparing one group of learners with another in order to establish difference. This limits the way culture can be understood since what may be an otherwise successful classroom, where interaction and learning are happening and sought outcomes materialise, is thus positioned, culturally, as dissonant and in some ways at least, deficient.

A smaller unit of analysis than a nation is offered by the idea of a community of practice (CoP) where that CoP is understood to be a grouping of those with common, often professional, interests and understandings (e.g. doctors, lawyers, etc.), which are developed over time by that community (McConnell, 2006) through 'joint enterprise' (Wenger, 1998, p.291). Is the online class a community of practice? Despite the fact that class members are engaged in a joint endeavour there are limits on the effectiveness of viewing a class this way since effective CoPs are evolutionary over years

and are not externally designed (Schwen & Hara, 2003). Most classes are explicitly designed to meet particular aims and few last longer than a matter of weeks; any shared understandings are thus of a limited nature or of transitory usefulness. Wenger (1998) does not either see ideas shared by CoP members as characterising culture. Rather, he views culture relating to CoPs where 'the scope ... is too wide for mutual engagement in the pursuit of a joint enterprise' in which case 'culture would be a composite repertoire created by the interaction, borrowing, imposing and brokering among its constituent communities of practice in the context of ... an economy of meaning' (p.291) - which is in turn the way in which 'different meanings are produced in different locations and compete for the definition of certain events, actions or artefacts' (p.199).

However, it is reasonable to assume that understandings gathered by individuals from membership of professional CoPs will contribute to the knowledge base on which they, as participant students, will draw when interpreting activity in the online class. The evolution of CoPs over time is interesting. In contrast to those of nations, the working practices of CoPs suggest that ideas are contested and change takes place there in response to members activity there - not simply in response to their membership: 'communities of practice are about content – about learning as a living experience of negotiating meaning – not about form' (ibid, p. 262). The online class is not a CoP but the working practices of CoPs hint at the merit of viewing culture within the class as an evolving process.

Recognising the limits of nationality-based and other essentialist approaches to culture, Reeder et al. (2004) examine (in a paper which develops the Canadian study published by Chase et al. discussed above) what they term the 'intercultural' interaction on their, in Hofstedian terms, all-Canadian course. They apply ideas of 'face' and Gudykunst's anxiety/uncertainty management work to show how and why interaction patterns differ and achieve varying degrees of 'success'. They stress a view of the online class as an intercultural setting (as opposed to cross-cultural<sup>2</sup>) and a view of culture that is qualitatively different from any idea of culture as nationality:

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<sup>2</sup> Gudykunst notes the difference between 'cross-cultural' and 'intercultural':

'Cross-cultural' and 'intercultural' are often regarded as interchangeable. They are, nevertheless, different. Cross-cultural research involves comparing behaviour in two or more cultures (e.g. comparing self disclosure in Japan, the USA, and Iran when individuals interact with members of their own culture). Intercultural research involves examining behaviour when members of two or more cultures interact (e.g. examining self-disclosure when Japanese and Iranians communicate with each other). ... Understanding cross-cultural differences in behaviour is a pre-requisite for understanding intercultural behaviour. (Gudykunst, 2000, p. 314)

... a definition of culture was used that moves beyond "essentialist" views of culture as values, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour that are learned through our experience and environment (Hofstede, 1980; Hall & Hall, 1990). Rather, we tend toward the social constructivist view espoused by Scollon & Wong-Scollon (1995) in which culture is viewed as "shared ways of symbolic meaning making among members of a social community." We treat the nexus of cultural production as discourse, in the present case, the online discussions amongst participants in an emerging online community. We further suggest that in online communications, as in face-to-face communications, culture is negotiated, not given. (Reeder et al., 2004, p.89)

Nonetheless, the emphasis of their work remains focused on issues and explanations of difference albeit it between groups of individuals rather than between individuals whose beliefs lead to them being viewed as 'generalized microcosms' (Hewling, 2005, p.2) of nation states.

The remaining sections of this chapter consider how the idea that 'culture is negotiated' (Reader et al., 2004, p.89) can be more fully realised. This will be seen to involve looking beyond ideas of difference, towards interaction across and despite difference. It also includes more players than simply the students.

## **2.4 Dynamic views of culture: 'culture as a verb'**

McSweeney, as noted above, has been a vocal critic of Hofstede's 'essentialist' approach to culture. McSweeney's critique is largely based on the methodology employed in the research. In particular, he questions the reliability of analysis based on what he sees as limited samples. However, he also points to other ways in which studies of culture may be positioned,

His [Hofstede's] notion of culture and values could be contrasted with arguably richer conceptions of culture (e.g. Geertz, 1973)' (McSweeney, 2002, p.90)

Clifford Geertz, like Hofstede but to somewhat different ends, draws on the work of Kluckhohn whose comprehensive definition of culture was also drawn on by Bond et al. (see 2.2 above). Geertz highlights the complexity of Kluckhohn's struggles to determine meaning for the concept of culture when he remarks that in a single twenty-seven page chapter in *Mirror for Man* (1957), Kluckhohn identifies more than a dozen (possible) definitions and variations of the term (Geertz, 1973, p 4). 'Eclecticism is self-defeating', Geertz feels, not because there should be only one way to look (a point which has subsequently been noted, to somewhat different ends, by Hampden-

Turner & Trompenaars – see 2.2.2 above), but because there are many possibilities and choosing is a (practical) necessity. Geertz summarises his own view of the concept of culture as,

... essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz, 1973, p.5)

However, he continues, the importance for understanding culture is not in identifying the 'ontological status' of symbolic actions but to question 'what it is ... that in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.' (p.5) Merely listing items or activities as constituents of, or prescriptions for, (a) culture is inadequate. In seeking meaning, attempts to define culture as a descriptive noun fall short of being entirely useful; culture cannot be adequately conceptualised without some idea of what it is doing. Brian Street, an anthropologist who has turned his attention to literacy, endorses the view of culture as doing, ' ... 'culture' as signifying process - the active construction of meaning' (1993, p.23). In his 1993 paper 'Culture is a Verb' he reviews endeavours to define and explain culture. Studying culture, he believes, is not about finding definitions but, rather, a matter of seeing how, when and why definitions are made:

Culture is an active process of meaning making and contest over definition, including its own definition. This, then, is what I mean by arguing that *Culture is a verb*. (p.25)

In this way 'culture' evolves over time, not in the sense of reaching an ultimate definition or conclusion, but as an ongoing process of sense making at any particular point in time, within a particular context and from a particular individual viewpoint (Gee, 2000, pp.188-89). Understanding intercultural interaction in the online class becomes then not a matter of collecting items of definitional content or trying to define features or behaviours as cultural or not, but rather a matter of examining and interpreting processes at work. Ideas arising from understandings of national culture will form a part of the resources available to participants in their 'doing' of situations but will not be the only frame of reference they draw on. Likewise, depending on what exactly is being done, ideas from one particular cultural frame of reference or another will vary in significance. In the context of the online class participants will draw on their store of frames of reference for education, as they would do in a f2f class, but the resultant activity will be different in each case as each context is different.

Accepting that culture is 'doing', looking at how culture may be implicated in the online classroom must, therefore, be a matter of examining the processes at work in that particular situation, but

Situations (contexts) do not just exist. Situations are rarely static or uniform, they are actively created, sustained, negotiated, resisted, and transformed moment by moment through ongoing work. ... What do I mean by enactive work and recognition work? Think about the matter this way: Out in the world exist materials out of which we continually make and remake our social worlds. The social arises when we humans relate (organize, coordinate) these materials together in a way that is recognizable to others. We attempt to get other people to recognize people and things as having certain meanings and values within certain configurations or relationships. Our attempts are what I mean by "enactive work" and others' active efforts to accept or reject our attempts - to see or fail to see things "our way" - are what I mean by "recognition work". (Gee, 2000, p.188)

There are multiple perspectives from which any individual may do either kind of 'work', at the same time, and in the same place, such that different 'configurations' are apparent within situations and will be subject to change, for 'a participant can attempt to change the meaning and value of a configuration in the midst of it' (op cit. p.189) as can those outside any one particular configuration who may see a situation somewhat differently. The ability of participants to change (or reinforce) the meaning and/or value of a configuration will depend on the role that they see themselves as playing in the configuration, or the role that they are accorded by other participants. Roles, however, are not static either, in fact, they are more usefully thought of as 'positions' (Harre & Langehove, 1999):

... a position is a complex cluster of generic personal attributes, structured in various ways, which impinges on the possibilities of interpersonal, intergroup and even intrapersonal action through some assignment of such rights, duties and obligations to an individual as are sustained by the cluster. (p.1)

For example, in the online classroom the roles of tutor and student will be maintained not just by according different players those titles but by the activity they all undertake, or don't, according to the roles they develop.

Furthermore, 'speaking positions are relational' (ibid) since in order for one position to be seen and recognised by participants as having power in a context, others must be seen as powerless (ibid).

However, this attribution of power is not fixed but may change as a context evolves in response to the positioning of participants. In the context of a discussion between a tutor and a student, for example, the positions of 'student' and 'tutor' offer different rights in terms of what either can say. The same words used by different participants will have a different social meaning according to the position of the participant saying those words (p.17) and the context (what Harre & Langehove call the 'storyline') in which they are being said.

In the 'situation' (context) that is the online classroom understanding culture 'as doing' must, therefore, in Gee's terms, involve multiple and ever changing 'configurations'; and these configurations will include multiple positionings, in Harre & Langehove's terms, of other participants within the configurations.

This approach to online interaction acknowledges diversity and avoids concentration on difference ('binarism', i.e. right/wrong, present/absent, good/bad, etc., in Scollon & Scollon's terms) or on stereotyping, which is inherent in 'essentialist' approaches to understanding culture. It also allows consideration to be 'based upon more than a single dimension of contrast' (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p.170) since all those involved in the online class will be simultaneously a member of many other groups. Furthermore, none of these groups will entirely define their way of 'configuring' (i.e. 'doing'), participation, in this particular situation (i.e. the online class) in quite the same way. It may be possible to attribute some perspectives to associations between individual students and their experiences or beliefs as members of a particular group which happens to be associated with their national origins, but those perspectives will form only part of the 'doing' that is their participation in the online class. The influence of national origins will be only one element in the enactive and recognition work of any one participant in the online class, just one thread, as Geertz might see it, of the cultural web woven by any individual. Diversity and individual difference are not simplistically acknowledged by means of the label of one nationality or another but are recognised as contributing in some way to interaction and class culture.

## **2.5 Culture and language**

In the text-bound environment which is the online class, written language is the principle interactional tool available for participants to undertake enactive and recognition work. In order to

examine the doing of culture therefore, it is necessary to look at the language being used in the online classroom. But, 'what exactly is 'language'?' (Taylor, S., 2001, p.6), and what is its relationship to culture? In the discussion of positioning above, it became clear that words may have different meanings or value according to who is saying them; in the rest of this section I will consider in more detail the relationship between language and culture and the implications of this relationship for the study of culture in a text-bound interactional virtual learning environment.

### **2.5.1 Understanding language**

For Hofstede 'language is the most clearly recognizable part of culture' (2001, p.11), the way in which culture is maintained and passed on. Thinking is determined by what is available in terms of words and categories within a particular language, as Kramsch suggests: 'language as code, reflects cultural pre-occupations and constrains the way people think' (1998, p.14). Different cultural groups speak different languages and, through their different languages, different societies explain and preserve their ideas, asserts Hofstede. This model of language has some commonality with the version of language with which Taylor initiates her discussion of how language can be understood: she offers the example of the way in which people often approach learning a new language by breaking it down into component parts, such as 'items of vocabulary, grammatical forms like plurals and tenses, and fixed expressions such as greetings...' (p.6). These parts are then learned as individual components which students can later reassemble in order to connect with other speakers of the language whose responses, in turn, the student can analyse into component parts.

On this model, the system of language works for communication because it is a vehicle for meaning; in other words, it can be used to convey meaning from one person to another, provided that both are familiar with the elements of the language. It is as if speakers or writers encode meanings into the language and then hearers or readers decode them. Wertsch (1990) ... calls this "the transmission model of communication": meaning is transmitted or conveyed, through language, like signals through a telephone wire. (Taylor, S., 2001, p.6).

This 'representationalist' view of language (Pennycook, 1994) implies a situation in which 'a real world exists prior to language and which is represented by language' (p.266). Acceptance of such a view of language implies that functional competence in the language of instruction of the online



class would enable all participants to undertake enactive and recognition work on an equal footing<sup>3</sup>. However, viewing language in this way is to accept it as 'static' (Taylor, 2001, p.6) - as Van den Branden and Lambert put it, this is 'to reduce the language problem to a technical-mechanical phenomenon instead of situating it in the broader context of communication' (1999) - whereas language in use is fluid, new words are added, promoted, or demoted in the course of daily usage. Language is constantly changing: 'new meanings are created through the to-and-fro and the combined contribution of both (all) parties' (Taylor, 2001, p.6). Language may be used to convey information but it is not a transparent, neutral information carrier. Rather, it is active, a place where meanings are offered, contested, developed and changed:

For its users, instances of language are never abstracted, they always happen in specific situations. They belong to particular people and are used to realize those people's purposes. (Cook, 2003, p.49)

Language, like culture, is a social process:

... always in dialogue – language, even when employed silently by individuals, it is always part of a social interaction, whether with imagined others or with the meanings and uses of words that others have employed at other times and places. (Street, 2001, p.19)

In investigating culture in the online classroom language is critical even when all participants are using the 'same' language since, in terms of Gee's enactive and recognition work, language is only the same in so far as it is the tool which is used by all to do that work:

When a language is not shared, there is a straightforward and very apparent barrier to communication. With cultural conventions, however, the consequences may be less apparent but more damaging. (Cook, 2003, p.53)

The 'same' language is the same only in terms of the words used, not in terms of the associations and meanings implied. This is a particularly important idea in understanding globalised education where 'students encounter discourse problems rather than simple language difficulties' (Pincas, 2001, p.30). The associations which students may make between words spoken and activity which is related to those words may easily not be the same as the associations intended by the speaker, or writer, of those words. In f2f visible cues assist in making meaning from the words being spoken but online the writer can only try more words – this may help but may also mislead further.

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<sup>3</sup> The use of minimum entry language competency standards set by some VLEs, such as the IELTS or TOEFL tests, implies

## 2.6 Situations and configurations

Taking account of participants' positioning and of their enactive and recognition work clearly offers a richer picture than that provided if only ideas of nationality-based or other essentialist ideas of culture are used. However, if essentialist interpretations can be criticised for providing an over simplification of processes at work then the richer version suggested by Gee and Street may be criticised as over complicating attempts to understand these processes by offering (potentially) an infinite number of interpretations. It is necessary to limit just how far exploration of 'configurations' will extend in any study of any particular situation. Given that this is a study of a class seeking to improve the knowledge and skills of practicing teachers within a formal educational institution, the enactive and recognition work being done by participants and which is examined below will predominantly focus on the themes of professional, disciplinary and institutional culture.

Goonatilake (1995), writing about globalisation in relation to culture, rejects the notion of culture being tied to nationality not simply because it limits understanding but rather, she suggests, because as an interpretative tool it has lost its usefulness. Whereas in the past, she asserts, any one individual had, at any one time, a single cultural identity constructed through socialisation from those in the immediate community, 'today's self is encroached upon dynamically by many shifting cultures' (p.231) such that 'in addition to the cultural mosaic derived from earlier times, it is today criss-crossed by cultural domains of the new professions' (p.236). Technology is facilitating greater global exchange of ideas and information so that in addition to f2f communities and cross-border communities there are what Goonatilake refers to as 'transborder' communities (often maintained virtually), building common associations and 'cultures' amongst 'professional callings' (p.229):

The modern physicist, doctor or engineer finds his overseas compatriots talking a near-identical language and existing in a common universe of discourse. They are bound together by their disciplines, their practices and professional norms. (p.229)

In order to maintain their position they must exchange information, and 'links across borders are vital for the lateral exchange of knowledge essential to the discipline' (p.230). As education professionals all pursuing advanced studies in education the students in this present study might be seen as participants in a single 'transborder' community. However, as advanced level teachers, they also have a diversity of other professional backgrounds underpinning their education

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that, indeed, if students are competent in the language of the VLE, they will thus be able to participate effectively in the VLE.

specialism; these range from business to nursing and church ministry. These professions also maintain cultural assumptions about how education is done. Some hold the assumption that education is done whilst working in the field, by distance education for example. Others anticipate that formal education will be complete by the time the practitioner begins their work in the profession.

Within a broad professional culture such as education therefore there reside different disciplines, different cultural groupings sharing characteristics and norms. Becher's (1989) 'Academic Tribes' examines this idea. At its simplest, shared disciplinary culture means that those writing within a particular field will use common patterns and variations of language and recognisable discursive structures to discuss or interpret their topic or research. This does not mean however that there will be no overlap with other cultural frames of reference. Work by Goliebowski and Liddicoat (2002) pursues what happens to the norms of language and discourse use within particular subject areas when the writers are from different national and language backgrounds. They argue that:

... the writers of specialist academic texts are not influenced entirely by their culture or by their speech community in their writing, but rather ... each writer is located at an intersection between culture and discourse community. (2002, p.60)

And,

...we are suggesting that there are two potentially opposing sets of forces operating within any discourse community. (2002, p.68)

Thus it is possible that discussion of, for example, a particular psychological phenomenon by a multi-national team of psychologists may use ideas which seem to run counter to referential norms from any or all of the nationalities from which the group is drawn. Likewise, the kinds of things they write about and how they position themselves in relation to what they write about may also differ. This will be all the more noticeable when communication is mediated by textualised online discussions but without visual social cues.

Looking at the VLE, ideas of professional or disciplinary cultural influences raise several issues. Not the least of these is the interplay, within any individual participant, between the practices and beliefs of the various cultures they may identify with and the way in which they deal with contradictions, for example by positioning themselves differently with regard to what is being said at different points in the interaction. Some discourse analysts use the term 'stake inoculation'

(Potter, 1996, p.125) when talking about how speakers manage situations where 'there is the possibility of having their version dismissed or discredited on the grounds of stake or interest' (Horton-Salway, 2001, p.55). In this way they, as members of a particular culture, they manage the risk inherent in what they are saying, i.e. they need to manage the position they are seen to take in order to reduce the risk that it might be said that their membership of that culture directly influenced, or contradicted, what they were saying.

Ways of working are impacted by disciplinary culture and, in a text-bound environment like the online class, there may be significant differences between individuals in the nature and complexity of what is considered suitable and appropriate to be written down. In the SOLE (Students Online Learning Experiences) study (Timmis et al., 2004) data was collected from students across a range of disciplines, but researchers found different kinds of data easier to collect in some disciplines than in others. For example, learning diaries were more successfully completed by psychology students, and it is suggested that this was in response to their familiarity with the technique which is well used within the everyday work of that discipline; that is to say that the idea of a learning diary made more sense to participants in the field of psychology because it reflected a way of working that was contextually sensible and meaningful to them as psychologists.

## **2.7 Chapter summary**

Defining culture is problematic and has been the subject of much debate by different people and in different contexts over time. Drawing on anthropological and sociological sources culture can be understood as a matter of beliefs, norms and understandings shared by a group. However, attempts to define the limits of a group by equating culture with nationality, as has occurred in much research to date, and then using this as a yardstick to predict how individuals will respond to new situations like the online class have serious limitations. Firstly, whilst essentialist ideas of culture may have value as broad indicators at the level of the nation, they are not specific enough to be of much use in a smaller context such as a class, or as a basis for looking at individual interpersonal interaction; i.e. the unit of analysis is inappropriate. Secondly, the essentialist approach presupposes that culture is fixed and brought online by each individual as an easily visible set of given behaviours. On the contrary, individuals' experiences prior to arriving in the online classroom mean that they will share understandings across a range of cultural groupings and, by providing expectations based on that experience, all those experiences will play a part in

how individuals approach a new context. In particular, understandings will be drawn from professional and disciplinary cultures. Likewise, other elements active in the class, tutors, course materials and technology, cannot be assumed to be culturally neutral. Approaching the online classroom as a new cultural context in which a new culture, of the moment, will be negotiated, recognises the diversity of experience on the part of all players (human or otherwise) in that context.

Negotiation of the new cultural context, seen as the realignment of multiple elements, takes place as those elements assume positions in relation to that context and to the other players sharing that context, and evolve new shared (and contested) ideas and understandings of the new context. The text-bound nature of interaction in the online classroom means that language assumes particular importance, not just as a conduit for meaning, but as the means of negotiating meaning, of doing culture in the VLE.

Having looked at the characteristics of VLEs in Chapter One and at how culture may be usefully understood for the purposes of this study in this chapter, in Chapter Three I will consider the relationship between the two. This will include looking at how research to date has contributed to understanding culture in the online class and defining more clearly the research questions for this study.



## Chapter Three

### Connecting VLEs and culture

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter takes ideas about VLEs discussed in Chapter One as well as ideas about culture developed in Chapter Two and looks at how the relationship between them has been investigated to date, especially using non-essentialist views of culture. The chapter concludes with research questions for the present study.

#### 3.2 Summarising the key characteristics of the VLE

Online classes situated in virtual learning environments offer the possibility of combining the flexibility of distance education with the kind of student to student interaction usually found only in the f2f classroom. This is a classroom which is open 24 hours a day at the learners' convenience, where asynchronous technology and text-mediated interaction enable participants to cross previously problematic geographic and temporal space. Time has new dimensions since there is no requirement to co-locate participants in order for discursive interaction to take place. Participants may remain invisible for any or all of their time in the class; they will only appear to others as and when they interact with each other through the medium of text - although their existence may be sensed in other ways. Collaborative working and knowledge construction, often claimed by advocates of f2f learning and teaching to produce a deeper multifaceted learning experience, are more easily available here than by means of traditional paper-based distance education. The key characteristics of the VLE can thus be summarised as flexibility, interaction, (new kinds of) time, text, collaboration and knowledge construction.

#### 3.3 The virtual learning environment in this study

The VLE in this study, as more fully described in Chapter One above, is a learning and teaching space accessed via the World Wide Web through a Blackboard delivery platform. The VLE content, teaching, etc. are provided by the host University. The facility to link these elements to administrative, management and technical support facilities is offered by an external technical provider. Together the services of both enable the provision of fully online education programmes to a globally recruited student body.

There is no f2f element in this VLE. All activity, both administrative and teaching/learning takes place online. Offline communication between the students and the institution is confined to the end of the year when they receive their end-of-year transcript and/or degree certificate.

### **3.4 Summarising ideas of culture**

As we have seen, much is attributed to culture but its definition is problematic. Most often it is used to describe the shared nature of values and beliefs within a group and, in particular, culture is often used as a noun synonymous with nationality. This becomes problematic since attempts to use any framework derived from such understandings as a tool for interpreting culture in the VLE, paradoxically, emphasises difference rather than cohesion, encouraging contrasts to be drawn and thus ideas of dissonance (e.g. where some students are seen to be unable to do certain things because these are perceived to be absent from their national cultural background). Such ideas are of limited usefulness in examining contexts such as the online classroom where activity takes place across and in spite of the co-location of participants of differing national backgrounds. Culture as a noun implies a static entity, whereas it is practised as a verb (Street, 1993), as ongoing, evolving processes involving a variety of inputs which will include but not be limited to ideas drawn from national, ethnic or geographic frames of reference. It is this evolving negotiated view which is used in this study.

### **3.5 Relating culture and online learning – research to date**

In 2001, when research for this study began, there were remarkably few studies directly addressing the role of culture in online learning. Even where classes were obviously recruiting globally the focus of much research was on the phenomenon of online learning and its relationship to f2f learning. Many of these studies polarised investigation around the issue of whether or not online learning could be as good as, or better than, f2f learning and subsequently found their way to the No Significant Difference Phenomenon website, (e.g. Schutte, 1997). Exceptions were few: Wauschauer's book 'Electronic Literacies' (1999) and those studies which appeared in special editions of BJET in 1999 (e.g. Lauzon) and Distance Education in 2001 (e.g. McLoughlin; Goodfellow et al.). Issues within online education which were subsequently to become more prominent as issues relating specifically to culture in the online class were more often discussed as part of a consideration of other topics, such as language (e.g. Furstenberg, 2001), or patterns of collaborative activity (e.g. Wegerif, 1998). The position has changed significantly since 2001 and



although there is still little literature which solely addresses cultural issues (Land & Bayne, 2005, p.1), many more studies offer more than a passing reference to cultural issues. The focus has changed subtly too, so that issues of language, for example, are now often discussed in terms of the study of discourse – language in use (e.g. Reynolds et al., 2004) - rather than in terms of competence or the meanings of specific words.

Broadly, previous research which relates to this present study can be categorised into four overlapping, but distinct, areas:

- Studies related to interface and VLE design – much of this work aligns itself with Human Computer Interaction (HCI) or Computer Human Interaction (CHI) interests, in terms of focusing on software design; other studies overlap with investigation of how collaborative activity happens, or is constrained, in the online class
- Studies related to collaborative and participative online activity and pedagogical considerations. Here overlap is most obvious with investigation of the online experiences of students
- Studies related to the online student experience - including the role of the tutor/facilitator. Some studies examine culture as a specific variable, usually referring to culture in terms of the (essentialist) categorisations of Hofstede, Hall, etc.
- Studies specifically focused on cultural aspects of globalised online learning.

These broad categorisations are used in the remainder of this section to discuss the issues which frame this present study and which are used to identify research questions for the study.

### **3.5.1 Interface and learning environment design**

Given the alleged superiority of the online environment for teaching and learning, as suggested above by writers such as Schutte (1997), it is perhaps surprising that the basic structural design of the learning environment in this study is based on a relocation, virtually, of a particular design of face-to-face classroom best described as North American/western European. Blackboard is not alone; this pattern is discernable in many of the VLE platforms which can be evaluated and reviewed via the EduTools website<sup>1</sup>. Areas are designated much as in the physical learning environment: the space for synchronous group working is labelled a 'virtual classroom' and the management tools for tutors are referred to as the 'control' panel - despite claims that this is a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.edutools.info/course/help/howto.jsp#compare>

learner-centred environment. The structuring of electronic links between shared class spaces and those for small-group work are fixed on the assumption that the class will be taught as a whole, by only one tutor, who will subdivide the class into exclusive-access sub-groups for a limited range of activities.

It is possible to hypothesise a number of reasons for this situation. Firstly, since developers are working commercially they must find a product that is widely recognisable and sufficiently universal to be of interest to a large enough market to ensure profitability. Secondly, they are developers – not educators. This is not to suggest that there is no educational input to VLE design, rather to explain the persistence, in terms of design, of the f2f model online - as a representation of what an outsider (i.e. designer) might suppose important in a learning environment. Fanderclai suggests this is,

... rooted in traditional notions of what education is and is not. A University or other organization may feel forced to create a virtual representation of a “real” university in order to make their MUD [*multi user domain*] appear a legitimate educational endeavour to those who do not understand its nature or purpose and yet control the funding. (1995, p.8)

So, if f2f is taken as the ‘ideal’ or ‘norm’ for learning then, by offering students at a distance the opportunity to experience that ideal, the online classroom can be seen as a positive improvement on a previously deficient, i.e. print-based, environment. In particular, by adding a variety of tools which support interaction and collaboration what has been viewed as the prime deficiency (Bernard et al., 2004) of a solitary learner environment is assumed to be remedied. However, a number of assumptions are left unchallenged by this ideal, not the least of which is that distance learners are lonely and isolated without the possibility for interaction with tutors and peers. In fact, many have the opportunity for telephone and face-to-face tutorials<sup>2</sup>, albeit not on the same scale as might occur if they were campus based learners. As one of the students in this present study reflected in interview: ‘we talked about ‘lonely’ learners and I actually challenged that because as an independent learner I wasn’t ‘lonely’, I was ‘only’, but I wasn’t ‘lonely’” (Pamela).

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<sup>2</sup> Examples can be found on university websites e.g. [www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk) and [www.usq.edu.au](http://www.usq.edu.au) and in student documentation.

McLoughlin (2001) reports that the idea of something being missing is equally common to ideas of 'inclusivity' in cross-cultural online education. This approach, she records,

views it as "deficit driven" – that is, inclusivity is about ensuring that international students (students of diverse language, race and ethnic backgrounds) can be brought up to a 'normal' standard by redressing their 'deficits' (2001, p.12)

For McLoughlin, inclusivity is, rather, about prioritising reciprocity, and online activity design must come after 'conceptualising an inclusive curriculum' (p.12). Use of collaborative web tools can facilitate a truly inclusive curriculum but such a curriculum must take account of 'all elements of the [learning] environment, such as resources, learning objectives, activities and assessment' (p.13), as an integrated whole. Simply adding collaborative tools is not enough. This sheds some light on a finding by Bernard et al. (2004), which they present as 'a puzzling outcome' in need of further research. The finding arose in their search for indicators to predict online learning achievement: 'contrary to the DE literature, "desire for interaction" – long thought to be a facilitative characteristic of modern DE applications – predicted negative rather than positive achievement' (p.45), and in fact it is only one element of many which input to achievement. There are no magic bullets to make intercultural or online education work effectively; these learning environments are complex contexts with multiple inputs, not machines with bits missing, and no single design element (e.g. collaborative tools) alone is going to fix any shortcomings.

Other reported assumptions associated with the 'dealing with deficit' notion in VLE platform design are that interaction will occur 'just because it is technologically possible', and that 'social interactions mediated by network technology follow the same patterns as those that occur face to face' (Ponti & Ryberg, 2004, p.334). Evidence from other studies supports the need for scepticism. Raybourn et al. discovered in their work with 'Forum' software that,

even though the system provides the functionality to support collaboration (finding users with similar interests and making users aware of one another), the Forum still does little to support spontaneous interactions amongst strangers, or people who do not know each other very well ... we now believe that it takes more than system functionality to motivate human communication in the virtual setting. (2003, p.93)

In order to overcome users' reluctance they instigated 'cultural signposts' in the form of access to contextual information. Sometimes this involved having information about meetings and discussions elsewhere in the organisation sent to individuals who were working separately on

similar projects. Other team building activity was initiated by sending more personal details of shared hobbies or interests. Avatar representations were also used in discussion spaces where they could be grouped together to show potential discussants who shared common interests. Cook and Jacobs (2004) offer a case study of why such contextualisation is extremely important when they look at the understandings and practices associated with 'discussion';

'Discussion' is a key term. It is used by tutors and students, on 'discussion' boards, as the title of the 'discussion board', by the VLE manufacturers, by professionals, researchers and academics working within the constructivist approach. (p.402)

But, they point out, the understanding of 'discussion' in the VLE is very different from that in common usage. In the VLE discussion may aim to be equal interaction between all present but in practice, in order to be productive in educational terms (Morse, 2003, p.48), it needs to be somewhat different. For example, some of Morse's participants noted how useful discussions were but also found many postings were 'rhetoric rather than discussion' (p.48). Salmon's (2001) hierarchical model of interaction online illustrates the complexities involved.

Mavor & Trayner identified a similar problem. In a British course, versioned for Portugal, on which they were asked to teach and which they subsequently evaluated, 'the rhetoric did not always seem to match the practice' (2003, p.459), and

online participation and experience is said to be crucial but is given no value in the system of student assessment [which is assessed] in the form of a traditional "essay" about an aspect of online learning (2003, p.459)

In their evaluation of the course they focus on the views of one of the participants, 'Roberto'. They note that whilst Roberto sees himself as participating in discussions,

... the discussion, in his view, exists to present a solution to a problem and is not, per se, part of the collaborative learning process. In fact, participation for Roberto appears to be in the form of posting a reply (with "added value") to a question, and not one that views discussion as a vehicle for negotiating meaning. (2003, p.473)

Mavor & Trayner conclude that simply stating that discussion activity is valued is not sufficient, it must be made an integral part of assessment processes (p.482). In a similar way, simply offering interactive elements within a VLE platform is not sufficient to indicate that these are an essential part of the online learning experience:

Unless we assume that all those who come to international courses have similar views of learning, then only those who are already at least partially familiar with the view of learning through discussion (and those who are ready to play with the unfamiliar) will be ready to participate and learn in this type of course. (p.474)

As Pincas (2001) notes, statements about required course activity or behaviour are often 'at variance with everything the overseas student has been trained to do' (p.36). This clearly applies to many of the supposed affordances of VLE platform design; whether indicated as affordances for learning or not, all will be open to widely differing cultural interpretation.

For Ponti & Ryberg (2004), designers of networked learning spaces must take account of 'how to foster and sustain conditions that support a social context' because 'teaching and learning constitute a social process of communication that occurs in a social and cultural environment (e.g. the classroom or the workplace)', where 'students and teacher make sense of who they are and what they are expected to do'. But this may not be what either party anticipates, for '(it) requires participants to engage in a process of re-creation of meanings to cope with the involved uncertainties and not rely on a passive process of simple acknowledgment of the new place' (2004, p.332). For Raybourn et al, in a workplace environment, this means that designers need to 'guide a community's culture to emerge from the user's co-creation of narratives ... users should own the cultural co-creation process' (p.106) such that a 'third culture' evolves:

The 'third culture' is what is created from an intercultural interaction when persons from different cultures communicate equitably and with respect for the other such that the emergent culture reflects appropriate input from each interlocutor. A third culture is the co-creation of meaning in which all interlocutors are participants as well as co-owners ... the quality and nature of the interactions determine the direction and rate at which a third culture emerges. (p.106)

Such a process seems to be at the heart of what is happening in the classrooms examined by Evers who, investigating how groups of users from diverse national cultures interpreted and used an educational web platform, noted that users seemed to 'build a cultural model' for each design element by associating the item with certain cultural value orientations rather than reflecting on to the elements their own cultural background. Users, she found, would then employ this model to 'frame all understanding and expectations of the item' (2002, p.332). The cultural value orientation would be based not only on the participants' national cultural understandings but also on their lived

past social and educational experiences. She cites as an example English participants who viewed the “Student Centre” feature as a social and educational environment, as a public place where users went in mixed groups of men and women to learn – a view not shared by other users.

Bourges-Waldegg & Scrivener (2000) do not approach culture in online environments as a matter of facilitating negotiation of meaning but, rather, see it as a matter of users’ ability to understand the ‘intended meaning of the representations used in the system (including those involved in the user’s interaction with the task, the environment, the tool and other users)’ (p.112). This is particularly critical, they feel, in ‘geographically dispersed user groups’ because options such as ‘versioning’, which they prefer to call ‘culturalisation’ (p.112)

cannot be used effectively in the case of systems shared by culturally diverse users because they are based on recognising the differences that exist between cultures in order to produce specific versions adapted to the needs of a given “target culture” (2000, p.112).

That is to say, any one system can only be ideally tuned to any one cultural group at once; there will be no universal or generic system which can be optimal for a group whose members originate in more than one culture. They also note that in interpreting ‘culture’ (i.e. as a phenomenon) the type of national characteristics that are delineated by such as Hofstede and Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, need to be viewed critically since they are ‘to different degrees, the result of their interactions with other cultures’. Onibere et al. (2001) reiterate this point, noting that the country in their study, Botswana, had been colonised by the British and its culture ‘might have imbibed some of the culture of those who colonised [it]’. They also note that, within its national boundaries, Botswana consists of no less than fourteen main ethnic groups each with their own language and cultural contexts. Members of these groups would also speak the national language (Setswana), and English. It is perhaps unsurprising that they found no agreement amongst participants in their study as to what a localised interface should look like:

Although there is an overwhelming agreement on the desirability of a “local interface”, there is no agreement as to which local language to use. Even the nationally adopted local language is not acceptable to most users. (Onibere et al., 2001)

For Bourges-Waldegg & Scrivener, cultural contexts are not just local however, but, through the medium of language, can be shared across cultures. They cite, as an example, that one does not need to be an Italian to be able to give meaning to the words ‘pizza’, ‘mozzarella’ and ‘pepperoni’

(p.112). And, in contrast to Onibere et al., their solution to creating an interface that would be understandable and acceptable to a cross-cultural group is not to try to reconcile differences or achieve consensus but actively to seek out cultural and interpretative differences, in order to create new, shared understandings (Bourges-Waldegg & Scrivener, 2000). This solution is built on their earlier study (1998) which found that interaction and exchange in online groups could be encouraged by making sure that those groups were deliberately culturally mixed (Bourges-Waldegg & Scrivener, 1998, p.303). Their study details how they were able to adapt a culturally specific website to a more generic and accessible one by a process they call MIMA. MIMA has four stages: observation, evaluation, analysis and design. The process involves recording how a culturally diverse group of users understand various representations of ideas, locating where common understandings can be found and redesigning the interface accordingly. However, despite being offered as a solution to dealing with cultural heterogeneity online, the process has a number of shortcomings. Firstly, it assumes that those sampled for their understanding are representative of large groups of others not surveyed. Secondly, it assumes that apparent commonalities of understanding can usefully be generalised. Finally, since it cannot sample every combination of groups of individuals, it may produce a solution for one grouping but there is no guarantee that if a VLE class were re-engineered using MIMA, for example, the interface would be equally suitable for any future class using the same interface.

Smith et al., report on designing usable cross-cultural websites using a complex process involving development of a set of profiles – ‘country fingerprints’ – for each target culture or sub-culture in which the website is to be used. Ideas from Hofstede and Hall inform these ‘fingerprints’, as does the idea of locus of control (Rotter, 1966) which Smith et al. see as ‘a closely related concept to Hofstede’s individualism-collectivism dimension’, and

... which refers to whether individuals tend to feel that events are the result of their own actions (internal locus) or the effect of the external environment and powerful others (external locus). (Smith et al., 2004, p.68)

The problem remains, however, that such websites, whilst being highly user friendly to the culture for which they have been designed, have limited effectiveness for situations where users are either not from the designated culture or are from a mix of cultures – as is the case in the transnational online classroom.

One final approach to interface and virtual environment design can be elaborated from studies such as that by Tapper (1997). Tapper looks at the skills required by a student in order to become a successful online learner. This study is premised upon the idea that successful use of the VLE is something that can be learned and that the learning required can be delineated as a set of skills, the mastery of which will guarantee success since learners will have become 'online literate' - where literacy is viewed in terms of its connection to technology rather than to social practice. Tapper notes that being online literate is a difficult state to define and that despite the skills acquisition which underpins it, 'it does not lend itself to a one-off learning situation but is ongoing' (p.37), and varies according to individual learners' experiences in their out of class lives as much as according to what they may learn in class (p.36); or, as Kirkwood puts it, 'students' familiarity with email (for work, domestic or social purposes) before they commence their studies does not necessarily mean that they are well prepared for sustained academic debate and discussion within on-line tutor groups (2006, p.125). One of Tapper's categories for analysis of the levels of online literacy amongst her sample was 'attitudes about online literacy'. She records that comments, negative and positive, made by students under this category in her survey show 'how important it seems to be for students to feel confident and in control' (p.34). This connects to ideas of the importance of 'self-efficacy' as identified by Wang & Newlin who demonstrate in their 2002 study that students who had high belief in their own abilities online were more successful in their studies. If it can be said, as has been suggested above by Ponti and Ryberg, that the online classroom is a place of negotiation where roles and responsibilities evolve, it is clear that any individual's self-efficacy may be influenced by this negotiation process. It thus becomes a socio-cultural issue rather than a purely cognitive one. Light & Light, evaluating a discussion facility, called "Skywriting", to assist class interaction amongst undergraduates, report that far from being a determinant in levels of participation, students ideas of their competency using computers was, in fact, unrelated. Instead, Light & Light found that 'issues of self-presentation and social comparison loomed much larger in the students' minds' (1998, p.175). The skywriting facility broke down barriers between younger and more mature students by showing the younger ones that the mature students, despite the supposed advantage of age, still faced the same issues in textual presentation of self as the younger ones (1998, p.175).

In summary: many designers have attempted to make VLEs user friendly by making them *look* like the f2f environments with which the designers are familiar, but f2f teaching and learning is not



universally practiced or understood in any single way. Even if design features are recognised there is a further issue for users in that concepts used online do not always mirror f2f concepts either. This is most significant when ideas such as 'collaboration' and 'discussion' are introduced. Some designers have therefore tried to add cultural signposts to assist learners seeking to come to terms with VLE culture, with the aim of improving interaction and collaboration and to facilitate the co-construction of meaning. These endeavours by designers suggest a need to compensate for some kind of deficiency on the part of learners with different cultural backgrounds, however, finding universal solutions is impossible. Yet other designers and researchers have suggested that success online requires skills and practice of those skills in an online context. They point out that there is a correlation between students' self assessment of technical IT skills and how well they will succeed online.

### **3.5.2 Studies related to collaborative and participative online activity and pedagogical considerations**

It has been noted that the collaborative potential of online learning is frequently seen as compensating for deficiencies in print-based distance education in comparison with the 'ideal' model of f2f. Also, that a design response to this situation is to try to replicate all the features of a f2f class in a VLE. It is perhaps unsurprising then that practitioners and researchers have expected to find collaboration and participation online that reflects that which occurs in the f2f class setting. One study by Curtis & Lawson concludes that 'there is evidence that successful collaboration as described in face-to-face situations is possible in online environments' (2001, p.32) but they note a number of differences in the performance of collaboration. They offer the principle ones as:

- 'The lack of 'challenge and explain' cycles of interaction' – which they report as characterising good interchanges in f2f tutorials
- the 'presence of planning activities within group interactions' – which they suggest are 'related to communication limitations imposed by lack of good real-time interaction support tools' online.

Broadly speaking, however, studies of online participation and collaboration fall into two overlapping, and often interdependent, groups: those dealing with what may be termed macro issues (i.e. of institutional practice, professional calling, etc.) and those dealing with more micro issues (i.e. those focusing on the individual participant). Clouder & Deepwell's 2004 study exemplifies the theme of many studies. They expected 'a good level of student interaction and

transferability of interaction from the familiar classroom setting' (p.430) when they moved their successful f2f class online during a period when students were to be off campus on work placement. This did not happen. First and foremost, participation online was extremely low and, secondly, 'a minority of students could be said to have engaged in true dialogue, stating beliefs, attitudes and opinions' (p.431). Similar findings are presented in other studies (e.g. Mavor & Trayner, 2003; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Mann, 2002; Lobry de Bruyen, 2004). Cook and Jacobs offer a not untypical situation where, of 97 students taking a course, only seven posted anything at all:

Of the 45 messages posted, 28 were original (that is not replies to a previous message), most of which were posted by the tutor. Only 12 messages related to the course substantive topic of the module, economics. There were no exchanges of more than three messages. (2004, p.p.403-4)

Lobry de Bruyen found that 75% of student messages 'were merely posting add-on notes in response to postings of previous students' (2004, p.74) with no summarising or convergence of idea despite nearly all messages being coded as related to the content of the unit of study (p. 76). Howard (2002), as noted by Clouder & Deepwell, concludes that between five and seven students account for the majority of interaction in any online class.

A number of explanations for (poor) levels of participation have been posited as a result of different studies of online classes. Clouder & Deepwell conducted focus group interviews and concluded that there were two principle areas of difficulty for their students. At the macro level, the institutional setting and the model of education practised where they were learning (f2f physiotherapy) had previously been very tutor-driven and had not encouraged students to see themselves in a position to learn from their peers (p.430). A similar observation is made by Brown – 'some students don't realize that it is an opportunity to learn from each other' (2001, p.33). Where Clouder & Deepwell's students had interacted with peers it had been on a more social basis. This interaction had helped them develop a community spirit which might have a social function in facilitating learning interactions (Curtis & Lawson, 2001, p.32) but not one which was based on shared ideas related to their learning (Clouder & Deepwell, 2004, p.430). The students' apparent failure to see 'the value of sharing their own personal thoughts and ideas' (ibid) is the result of cultural conflict in terms of interpretation of competing ideas of the positioning of learner, tutor and knowledge within individual students' frames of reference. Confusion over the value placed by each student on the status of

their own, and others', knowledge is exacerbated by the interference in their understanding of the value of their opinions by the reality that much of the learning which occurs in the university is based on empirical evidence published in 'eminent journals'. 'In this context, such knowledge is privileged over personal knowledge construction' (ibid.). Howland & Moore (2002) found that amongst students who did not like online learning, 'many revealed the same mental model for an online course as for a face-to-face course ... Frequently, students interpreted the need for self-responsibility in learning as abandonment, and felt isolated.' (p.187)

For Reynolds et al (2004) a significant macro-level deterrent is 'an expectation of consensus as a defining characteristic of 'collaboration'' (p.255). This can be seen as working against the introduction of different or alternative opinions into discussions since the answer to the question: 'what is collaboration?' may not include any kind of negotiation. This dilemma relates closely to the issue raised by Cook and Jacobs (see 3.5.1) above, concerning how 'discussion' may be interpreted differently by designers, tutors and participants in the online classroom. It may also explain Curtis and Lawson's observation that online collaboration seems to exclude the 'challenge and explain' element visible in f2f collaboration, although given that in most studies there are reportedly very few participants who actually contribute to discussion, it seems likely that such exchanges would be difficult anyway. Mavor & Trayner's observation that there is a lack of motivation for online interaction when it forms no part of assessment of outcomes is also implicated here.

Collision between macro and micro level deterrents to participation is also noted by Reynolds et al. when they comment on the 'interference' felt by some of their study participants who were by profession teachers:

Students who in their working lives are also teachers, for example, have the additional discomfort after years of educational socialization of having their role expectations disrupted by participative approaches. (2004, p.256)

It is worth noting here that these students were also teachers working principally within the context of the same national educational framework as the class in which their students were operating; it is not hard to see that this clash of discourses might be even more disruptive to participation for teachers who had been socialised in other national educational frames of reference. This may not be a negative clash. Howland & Moore encountered a student who was also a teacher who found

the online experience helped her see her own students' relationship with her in a new light as she realised how much they were relying on her to drive their learning rather than relying on themselves (2002, p.188). However, it can also be 'challenging and risky' (McConnell, 2002, p.7) and Wegerif (1998) cites the case of a student who despite apparently sharing an educational background with his online colleagues dropped out of the online discussions because he felt his educational knowledge was inferior to that of his colleagues because he had a training rather than a teaching background (p.41). A similar but opposite case is cited by Goodfellow (2004b) where a student with a business training background tried to take charge of an online group. Confusion over conflicting messages from conflicting, or even similar, discourses is unsurprising (Clouder & Deepwell, p.431). Indeed, it would seem that such confusion is inherent, but not necessarily negative, at the macro level in the online classroom. Indeed, it was experience of heterogeneous classes that *did* work, as I have noted in the introduction to this study, which was one of the factors that motivated me to begin this research; not all students who feel different fail.

At the micro (i.e. individual) level, confusion and personal conflict are manifest in a number of ways in most of the studies of participation in the online classroom. In this regard 'lurking' is the technical term most often referred to. Salmon suggests there are three types of lurkers: the freeloader – who uses the contributions of others without offering anything of their own; the sponge – who is learning new things and does not yet feel confident enough in the subject to contribute; and lurkers with skills or access problems – who have technical or access problems which they offer as reasons for not contributing (Salmon, 2000, p.80). All three are seen as problematic. More recent studies, as I shall discuss in the rest of this section, suggest these categorisations offer somewhat limited potential in interpreting non-participation and that there may be other factors at play for those individuals who do not contribute or who do so in a limited way.

Potential loss of face for the student who 'makes a mistake' in a posting is a powerful reason given by several studies (Clouder & Deepwell, 2004; Cramphorn, 2004; Mann, 2000). The 'mistake' does not need to be one of fact but may be one of misunderstanding and, in this regard, humour is noted as particularly 'dangerous' (Cramphorn, 2004, p.421) both for native and non-native speakers since not only may it be misunderstood but such misunderstandings may damage group dynamics. Salmon indeed acknowledges that students may need to 'observe' discussion for a while before they are ready to contribute themselves (Salmon, 2000, p.81). As Mann notes,

we need to establish the 'trustworthiness' or not of our interlocutors – who they are – in order that we can work out what kind of communicative context we are in and therefore what norms or 'rules' of behaviour and interaction are to apply. (2002, p.20 of 31)

This is echoed in other studies (Cook & Jacobs, 2006), and the risk from breaking normative rules 'may carry both social and educational sanctions' (p.34). Ideas of the expected roles of the 'interlocutor' once identified will be highly influential and, as been seen above, such understanding will be based on a variety of social and cultural interpretations.

Brown reports that this 'look before you leap' behaviour is not a universally experienced process; some students adapt much more readily while others still do not feel confident even after several courses (2001, p.27 & p.32), and hints that this may depend on how well they are able to use the elements available online for creating friendship and support groups. For Wilson and Whitelock, 'there is a critical period in which students need to get on-line in the first instance, otherwise they probably will not participate' (2000, p.168). Both technical issues and self-confidence play a part, and these may conspire so that students miss the window of opportunity (Lobry de Bruyen, p.74) for getting involved in a particular discussion. Lobry de Bruyen suggests this may often be a matter of bad time management on the part of the student but there are a number of other factors that may come in to play. She also suggests that the student may be reluctant to state their point of view because it seems already to have been made by another student. In an online class of 20 or more the desire, learned from other educational environments, not to be seen to be 'copying' might effectively disenfranchise the majority of the class or, at least, act as a major deterrent to their participation, if those same students also find they need more reflection time for composing messages. For example, if they are not native speakers of the language of the online class then they may well find that by the time they succeed in posting a message 'the moment is passed'. They may feel this makes any contribution they might make look out of place and discourages them from making any further effort to enter discussions. And, unless participants do participate by making a visible mark, i.e. posting a message, they remain invisible to the rest of the class.

Brown (2001) touches on issues of visibility in collaborative efforts when she reports on the value of emergent community:

Several participants talked about how they witnessed students "gathering around" the person who reached out and shared his or her problems, providing support and

encouragement, which helped the recipient feel as though the problem was surmountable so that membership in the class or program could be continued. Several students said they could “see” students on the fringe and suggested that it might be possible to nudge them into greater participation and/or more timely participation that would help them find that community more readily. (p.33)

The supportive nature of the online community is the focus of Conrad’s study which notes that students are generally more supportive to each other and ‘nicer’ than might be suggested from studies of online discussion listserv communities which seem to exhibit high levels of conflict. She notes,

online learners’ lack of anonymity [unlike in online gaming environments for example], learners’ strong senses of purpose, our societal inclination to be “nice” to people, and learners’ prolonged commitment to a program of learning – created in this study’s learners an *increased* sense of inhibition which, in turn, led to their concerted efforts to maintain equilibrium and harmony through their heightened application of etiquette. (2002, p.206)

For Reynolds et al., however, there is a dilemma: the fact that their participants ‘knew’ each other, by interaction if not by sight, meant that some activities did not produce the debate and critique the tutors sought but also meant that potential ‘rebellion’ over some activities was diffused by the relations between students being mediated by ‘the networked environment’ (2004, p.255).

Wegerif suggests that success online is dependent upon the ‘extent to which students were able to cross a threshold from feeling like outsiders to feeling like insiders’ (1998, p.34) and suggests that there is a need for “scaffolding” to enable participants to do this. Cramphorn takes this point further and suggests that part of the scaffolding required is to make clear to students the nature and requirements of discussion board interaction since when first encountered ‘the constructivist nature of the forums is a de-motivating factor’ (2004, p.422). He feels that an introductory f2f meeting is required before students use such forums. Wegerif’s idea is also taken up by Mavor & Trayner (2003, p.478). They further envisage ‘staged structuring’ (p.479) as a means of easing students from different backgrounds into online participation. This might mean beginning with very small online groups and gradually expanding them as confidence and familiarity develop (p.478-479). Clouder & Deepwell (2004) conclude that to improve effectiveness of their online environment the affective aspects of the relationship between the members of the student group must be

encouraged. They propose doing this by increasing student understanding of the difference between 'criticism' and 'critique', believing that 'students might be happier to engage in critique if coached in how to question one another and offer constructive feedback online' (p.434).

The nature of the participation that does take place online is investigated by Kanuka and Anderson (1998) who report that little interaction actually displays higher level knowledge construction, 'most of the online postings ... were limited to the social interchange category'; furthermore, 'it was made clear by the participants that the greatest value of the online forum was the ability to share and receive information, as well as to *network* – not to construct new knowledge' (p.11 of 13). As Clouder & Deepwell put it, 'students engaged primarily as 'information givers' and 'information seekers' rather than 'opinion givers' (p.432). Mavor & Trayner echo Wegerif (1998) in suggesting that participation is about students' conceptions of themselves as 'outsiders' and 'insiders' and is thus about identity construction as much as about knowledge building. Hewling (2002) has suggested that part of becoming functional online is the building of a 'learning persona', a process which can occur only through interaction. There are presently no studies of individual learner participation beyond the limited scope of one particular course or module and it is difficult, therefore, to establish how interaction and participation by any one learner might change as they become experienced beyond any one course. Likewise little attention has been paid to how 'old' and 'new' learners interact and what might be the effect of either group (or individual) on such interaction. Brown reports that 'a few students who had successfully completed several classes admitted to still feeling like new students' (2001, p.32). As will be explored in the next section of this chapter, getting a true student perspective on the online classroom is fraught with data collection and other methodological problems, not to mention theoretical ones, such as whether there is 'a' coherent view or 'true' perspective across groups of students.

### **3.5.3 Accessing the learners' online experiences**

Many studies of the online student experience report on that experience in terms of learning outcomes - as manifested by success or failure in course assessments. This approach precludes investigation of how learners themselves perceive or understand the experience of online environments. The inherent assumption is that even if students perceive the online classroom as unsatisfactory their overall assessment of the experience will be positive if they have succeeded in completing the course or gaining a qualification. A focus on outcomes is an understandable

approach to researching the online class in an economic climate in which if classes can be shown to be successful they are likely to continue. However, this approach does not allow for qualitative assessment of the learning environment and findings from such studies offer limited useful input to this present study. From the point of view of this study, outcomes-based approaches to researching the online class offer only tantalising hints of where culture may be implicated in terms of what may be happening, but no indication of how it may (or why it needs to) be understood.

Other studies of students' experiences online are institution based. An example is Weyers et al.'s (2004) Student E-Learning Survey which looks at online learning at the University of Dundee. The VLE in this case uses a Blackboard platform and delivers modules as part of 'blended' learning programmes. Most students in the study are reported as being enrolled in between one and three online modules. Being a single institution, non-comparative study, Weyers et al.'s report makes little reference to the characteristics of the student population, except when they refer to student comments to the effect that removal of the VLE facility would make it difficult for them to study because it would be difficult for them to attend campus meetings (p.24). This study is interesting, however, in that it reports the most frequently used features of the VLE as being the posting by tutors of course notes and PowerPoint presentations; the use of the announcement feature, and the existence of an online course handbook, rather than discussion board options. This implies that the VLE is regarded more as an information repository than as a site of interaction. It is interesting too that students' ideas for improvement of the VLE focus on increasing tutors' commitment to using it; getting more courses online; having VLE activity better integrated into the day-to-day life of the university and improving delivery design so that it becomes more interactive (p.18). There is seemingly an institutional cultural element to use of the VLE by tutors which is in some conflict with the expectations of the students.

Timmis et al. (2004) report on the methodology of the Student Online Learning Experiences (SOLE) project which, recognising that most studies of online learner experience were institution based, sought to evaluate learner experience via a cross-institution, multi-discipline study including five sub areas: education; psychology; information and computer science; economics; and hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism. Data for SOLE was collected using a variety of methods and it is remarkable that students in different disciplines seemed to respond better to different collection methods. For example, students in psychology had higher rates of completion for self-reported



diaries whilst economics students provided much more discussion board data (p.681). Indeed, it is the discussion board data from the economics group which provided the material for the Cook & Jacobs study referred to earlier in this chapter. Although not reported as such, there were apparently cultural differences in the way in which different groups of students approached their VLE experience.

Mann (2002) offers an entirely personal view of the issues for an online learner when she reflects on her own learning experience. She reports a variety of issues which are raised by others such as low levels of participation, the potential, via text, of being misunderstood, and feeling the lack of a community having (as a teacher herself) expected there to be one. What little feeling there was 'remained at all times a community without clear boundaries'. Most significantly she reports how onerous the task of being an online learner was:

... the ponderous, heavy nature of communicating in this way, with only the written word to express ourselves. The demands of reading and responding through writing seem far greater than those of immediate face to face response where so much more can be taken for granted. ... the weight of words is felt so keenly. ... A whole new communication process has to be learned. It is not simply a process of shifting from speaking and listening to reading and writing. (2002, 18 & 19 of 31)

Consequently Mann feels that critical issues for learners online include the need to construct new learner and teacher identities, and the need to make explicit operating norms and conventions for discussion. She concludes that there is a 'need to take account of the fact that some learners engaging for the first time in networked learning require the learning of new literacy practices' (p.20 of 31).

Both SOLE and Mann offer new insights into the online learner experience but, because they rely so heavily on (self) reported data, the validity of their data is considered by some other authors as limited – and limiting, in terms of how much weight can be accorded to conclusions derived from such data. This is a "Catch 22" situation. LaPointe & Gunawardena are concerned that some of the correlations in their 2004 study of the relationship between peer interaction and learning outcomes may be due to the self-reported nature of their data (2004, p.102) and wonder whether future researchers might not want to use 'measures of cognition other than self-reported learning' (p.102). Grabe et al. express concern about using self-selected participants to investigate student use of

new online tools (2002, p.382). However, if progress is to be made in seeing the students' view of the online class (independently of the students' view as directed by the tutors/researchers view of what the students' view should be), then such dilemmas have to be faced by concentrating on what *can* reasonably be concluded rather than by focusing on what cannot. If further confirmation is required, themes arising from qualitative analysis can later be considered further by use of quantitative methods deemed more robust (Gales, 2003, p.138). Further discussion of reactivity in relation to this present study is to be found at 4.2.4 and 4.2.5.

#### **3.5.4 Cultural Issues in studies of online learning**

It was noted in Chapter Two that many of the studies of online education that make reference to culture draw on what may be termed 'essentialist' ideas, in particular those derived from studies by Hofstede and Hall, where culture is deemed to be an attribute of an individual as a consequence of their nationality, ethnicity, etc.

Kim and Bonk, for example, look at cross-cultural online collaborative behaviours and use the work of Hall, Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey. They subsequently conclude that,

Korean students were more social and contextually driven online, Finnish students were more group-focused as well as reflective and, at times, theoretically driven, and US students more action-oriented and pragmatic in seeking results or giving solutions (2002, p.2 of 31).

However, what is unclear from this study is how homogeneous the national groups studied were (within themselves) and what, if any, was the effect on any of the participants when they interacted with each other across national divisions. Particular group characteristics are offered and group behaviours compared, but no picture is offered of the behaviour of the total student group as an interacting, collaborative group. Thus the only information to be gained by the end of the study is how different national groups perform in relation to a supposed norm for that nationality. This offers little insight for the present study since it makes all judgements in relation to externally imposed characterisations of culture rather than in relation to culture as it is, or is evolving, within the class.

Morse (2003) divides participants in an online graduate seminar cross-nationally, along the lines of Hall's 'low' and 'high' context groupings. His study concludes,

... cultural background directly influences the priority of perceived benefits received and challenges posed from the same asynchronous communication network. ... Further, high context participants in an asynchronously delivered seminar ... are at least initially disadvantaged by technology differences as well as the communication norms implicit in their cultural background. (2003, p.51)

As with the Kim and Bonk study, there is little information about the homogeneity of individuals within the groups studied other than in terms of the categorisations chosen for analysis. And, there is an underlying assumption that cultural analysis is a matter of determining fixed categories.

Gunawardena et al. (2001), compare differences in the perception of online group processes between participants from Mexico and from the US using ideas from a number of 'essentialist' perspectives and determine that 'country differences ... accounted for the differences observed between the two groups' (p.117), although they simultaneously, and contradictorily, identify the prime shortcoming of any analysis which uses essentialist categories: 'individual differences in cultural groups need to be accounted for so that we do not subscribe to the fallacy of homogeneity or the fallacy of monolithic identity' (p.117).

Morse suggests that improving the interactional potential of the online environment is a matter of designing a 'broader, transcendent multicultural context' (p.51) although it is hard to see how this might be done given the apparently insurmountable differences he identifies between individuals. Kim and Bonk (2002) suggest that such design work might include usability testing in different countries (p.25). They also suggest that students should be offered examples of previous cross-cultural 'case transcripts' via a help system so that,

If learners are aware of different communication styles across cultures, they will become more competent in understanding their differences and figuring out how to cope with such differences. They might also respect such differences to a greater degree. (p.25)

Significantly, neither of these studies problematises the situation whereby, despite different preferred communication styles amongst participants, interaction is still taking place on these programmes - and to the apparent satisfaction of (at least) some of the students.

Interestingly, both the Kim & Bonk and Morse studies suggest the need for increased effort on the part of educators, a theme which is pursued, from a social-constructivist perspective on learning, by McLoughlin (2001) when she states,

Teaching for cultural diversity means giving learners expertise and practice in multiple ways of constructing knowledge, bringing benefits to the entire student population and reflecting good teaching practice. (2001, p.11)

McLoughlin, in a theoretical study, draws from many other studies to provide ten guidelines for building 'a better base for culturally appropriate teaching online' (2001, p.23). The guidelines focus not on distinguishing different groupings amongst students but on developing relationships across difference in three directions:

- Creating community between participants through 'interaction, immediacy and interactivity'
- Learning activities which 'foster 'cultural synergy' or reciprocal learning about cultures'
- Offering multiple perspectives and encouraging exchange of views by all within a 'safe' environment. (pp. 23-24)

Goodfellow et al (2001) is a study which whilst trying to 'identify aspects of the learning experience that students perceive as culturally marked' - in order that they may tailor delivery specifically for 'cross-cultural participation, rather than simply ... transmit our own cultural and academic norms' (p.67) - tries to avoid dividing participants along 'essentialist' lines. This proves to be problematic since, as they note, dividing the students on the basis of commonalities runs the risk of 'perpetuating the very distinction we are trying to eradicate' (p.67). They eventually determine two categories, the 'culturally other' category being the one that includes those students who are non-native speakers of English and whose previous study experiences were 'in countries with different pedagogical traditions from that of the UK'. Goodfellow et al. also looked at the scores that individuals in this group achieved in assignments and established that they received lower marks than those students not allocated to the 'other' group. Whilst determining that 'these figures do appear to justify our regarding the Group 2 students [the 'others' group] as a coherent group in some sense' (p.71) they also note that 'For the student, however, this might not be the most meaningful definition' (p.69) and that disciplinary background might be just as important for any individual in determining how they would position themselves in relation to the study they were undertaking. Such analysis is unusual in current studies because it calls into question the ability of the researcher to determine conclusively how students may be grouped and, in the process of

doing so, calls into question not only whether there can be fixed categories of culture but also whether cultural categories can be determined by anyone other than the individual who is to be classified. In terms of the present study this work implies that in order to understand culture in the online classroom it is essential to consider, actively, how individual players in the classroom are both positioning themselves and being positioned.

Goodfellow et al's interviews with students in the 'others' category established 'topics of 'cultural otherness', 'perceptions of globality', 'linguistic difference', and 'academic convention' as four focal constructs around which their experiences could be recounted' (p.65). Goodfellow et al. conclude that the narratives involved, i.e. the ideas and embedded understandings within these constructs, including those embedded in the practices of the host educational institution, need to be made explicit from the start of any cross-cultural online programme.

'Cultural otherness' narratives clearly have an important place in these participants' perceptions of their experience of the MA, either in terms of the way they position themselves in contrast to the English-speaking 'Course' with its academic values, or to fellow-students perceived as having different ways of interacting. This suggests to us that any future design for cross-cultural communication in programmes such as this should begin by making explicit the forms that these narratives take, including the ways they are embedded in institutional practice (e.g.: the view of the global market that the university-as-provider takes). (p.80)

They further note that, 'Linguistic differences are implicated in these narratives, but so also are conceptions of social behaviour as manifested in online textual interaction.' (p.80) This leads them to speculate that improving cross-cultural online learning might also involve developing multilingual materials – implying an inextricable link between culture and language. Furthermore, this link is divisive as opposed to providing a means of sharing cultural understandings as envisaged by Bourges-Waldegg & Scrivener (see 3.5.1 above). Although, equally, they acknowledge that further investigation of the idea of 'third culture' in terms of practices being enacted in online classes is also important.

Goodfellow has pursued the theme of the importance of the role of the institution. He has examined its cultural role in the online classroom, in terms of how ideas of the prevailing institutional culture are manifested within its practices, by 'looking through a social literacies lens' (2004b, p.396). He

argues that reading and writing online are literacy practices similar to those offline. As such these practices,

are ways of doing things with texts that actively construct the learning environment, the very means by which we enact definitive roles such as teacher, learner, author, examiner etc. because such roles are already defined and constrained, in any particular situation, by a wider set of institutional relationships, then the texts that we read, write and send must embed relations of power that reflect those of the wider institution. ... it is important to explore the nature of these relations in order to account for, ... those aspects of interaction in the online learning environment which result in the frustration, marginalisation or even eclipsing of individuals. (2004b, p.396)

This latter point is especially critical for studies such as the present one. If, as Goodfellow suggests, students are marginalised by educational institutional literacy practices they will not be contributing to collective class activity (as manifested by discussion boards, etc.) in the manner intended or expected by the institution. Thus, when the class is investigated (by means of examination of those messages – perceived as instantiating class interaction) the marginalised student becomes doubly disadvantaged since their voice does not feature at all and, unless actively sought out, will go unheard (Goodfellow, 2004a, p.396). In this present study the visible institutional presence is entirely manifested through web pages and the delivery platform itself since all interaction between the student and the university, prior to graduation, takes place via the Internet. The possible marginalising effects of institutional literacy practices are probed in this study by the inclusion in the interview sample of a number of students who ‘dropped out’ of the programme.

Thorne’s (2003) focus is on intercultural communication within foreign language learning and he offers three case studies of online class interaction to support his perspective, a perspective which extends well beyond the confines of language teaching:

Focusing on the relationships between cultures-of-use and intercultural human communicative activity mediated by the Internet, I suggest, inspired by Latour (1993, 1999) and Tomasello (1999), that cultures-of-use and mediational artifacts co-evolve over time. It is this co-evolutionary process that warrants attention and that correlates to how communication is carried out at both the intra and intercultural level. People engaged with and mediated by material culture in all its forms mark the profitable point of

departure for research in the area of communicative practice and intercultural understanding. (Thorne, 2003, p.58)

For Thorne,

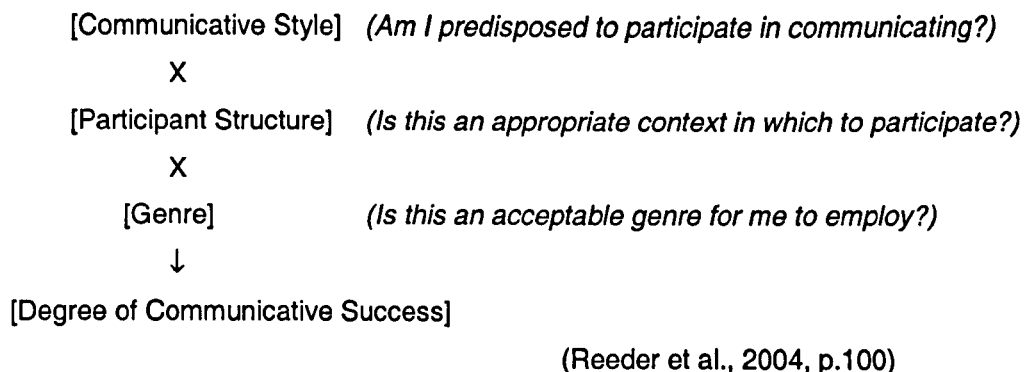
Showing that cultural, individual and collective historical factors influence the ways students perceive Internet communication tools and their (mis)uses provides insight into relationships between language use, mediational means, levels of engagement, and the potential for authenticity in the communicative process, all of which are implicated in the activity of language development. ... Cultural artifacts such as global communication technologies are produced by and productive of socio-historically located subjects. Such artifacts take their functional form and significance from the human activities they mediate and the meanings that communities create through them. (ibid.)

Thorne's ideas are particularly interesting for this present study because they offer a reminder that cultural input to the online class comes not just from many and varied cultures (e.g. national, institutional, professional, etc.) with which participants may identify, but also from the tools - the 'artifacts' - through which these cultural inputs are mediated and the cultural baggage these carry, in terms of norms and practices of use.

Thorne's work is used to problematise 'ostensibly culturally neutral e-learning tools' in the course of Reeder et al.'s 2004 study. The study which had, as its overall aim, to

test critically the widely held assumption that the use of standardized communications technology, implemented with competent professional pedagogy, will constitute sufficient conditions for successful communications and learning for culturally diverse cohorts participating in a distance learning programme. (2004, p.88),

has been noted at 2.3 above for attempting to take a non-essentialist approach to the issue of culture. It is, indeed, one of very few studies seeking actively to engage with the relationship between culture and online learning in a way that does not produce outcomes which suggest only that difference, and by implication dissonance, is the net result of any intercultural encounter online. Reeder et al. propose that any model of online intercultural communication must include certain elements which are pre-conditions for successful communication. They express their model as follows.



This model problematises particular aspects of intercultural online communication and elaborates upon them in terms of norms and mutual understandings not just from one (nationality based) culture but from (potentially) a range of cultural starting points. It is thus more satisfactory as an explanatory tool - and more interesting as a study - than investigations which use essentialist frames of reference. However, it is still less than satisfactory in terms of accounting for the role of the individual (as a single entity rather than as an individual member of a group) in terms of understanding the role of the individual in the practice of culture in the online classroom. For example, whilst ‘genre’ (or either of the other elements in the model) are flexible in the sense that they are seen to vary according to choices on the part of the individual, or according to the context (as perceived by any individual within that context), there remains an inherent assumption that what is at stake in the (online intercultural) interaction is difference between individuals, dissonance and an overall lack of communication. This further implies little potential for successful communication, although participants clearly *did* communicate. The resultant interaction is seen by Reeder et al. only as unsuccessful – despite being both interaction and intercultural. Thus while Reeder et al. purport to focus on the negotiation of culture online their outcomes attend primarily to givens, in terms of prior understandings, as opposed to attending to the ongoing work of evolving understandings. The latter are critical to understanding online intercultural interaction and form the focus of this present study.

### 3.6 Summary (the gap)

Online learning has huge potential to cross boundaries of many kinds, not least geographic and temporal, in order to create boundary-free, intercultural spaces where the broadest diversity of students can meet and learn. However, being a new environment little is known of the way the online class works, the essence of life there; how to “be” in that undefined space. Some suggest it is best managed by imagining it much as other environments which are already known and



understood, and thus it is assumed by many practitioners that behaviours and practices therein must also resemble those of other known environments. Increasingly, however, it is clear that f2f norms and practices are of limited use in the online class environment; it simply is not the same as f2f even though many designers would shape it thus. Students and teachers discuss issues, yes, but online they can never do so completely in 'real time' and the interaction must be written; there is no place for looks of encouragement or frowns of incomprehension (Lea, 2001).

An alternative approach suggests that the online class is a new world where new understandings are required - but it is not yet clear what those might be nor how information about them might be gathered. Old ways and 'rules' may imply answers but these answers may not, in fact, be sensible in this new context. To date, understanding of cultural influence in globalised education has been driven by models of national culture implying that behaviour is driven by nationality and that this can, in turn, be used to predict outcomes. Few markers exist for other ways of seeing the multi-nationality/multi-cultural classroom. It is clear that negotiation and construction of new ways are required on the part of both users of, and researchers in, this new cultural environment - but often there seems to be no-one around to negotiate with; asynchronicity and invisibility do not allow for negotiation which resembles previously tried and tested models. The student who is reading the course assignment details, for example, and does not understand what is expected in terms of response cannot question the tutor in the same way as they could do in a f2f class where it is written on a whiteboard or presented as a handout and the tutor is presently standing in front of them. Online they have to find a way to attract a tutor's attention and undertake an asynchronous negotiation. This study concentrates on the processes involved in this problematic negotiation. It takes the individual student as the basic units of analysis, rather than the norms of a nation or ethnic group to which the individual might possibly be seen to belong.

Very often too technology has been seen, by researchers and users, as a value-free way of offering education across boundaries of time and place. But technology is not value free, and physical and time boundaries are not the only ones that divide, or distinguish, potential virtual learners. Any and all learners have identities beyond those of ethnicity or nationality and those identities involve beliefs and assumptions and understandings shared (or perceived to be shared) by some but not all others. Each and every one has ideas of the ways of 'doing' culture which, as with all human activities, will effect how they undertake any new endeavour. Ideas and

assumptions are as likely to be drawn from membership and experience of professional, institutional, technological or other cultural contexts as arise from membership of national or other ethnic cultural groups. Online learning, through designers, software and hardware, makes its own assumptions about these assumptions without necessarily problematising them. Problematising has happened in some areas but there remain gaps needing to be filled if the relation between culture and the virtual class, as a location, is to be better understood. The locus of research attention must also be reassessed (Hewling, 2004a, p.3), away from what is brought into the class from outside and towards what evolves within the class itself amongst whoever is 'in' there.

### **3.7 Research questions for the present study**

In light of the gap identified above, and on the assumption that culture is not a matter of givens brought online by class participants but is, rather, negotiated within the class context, I revisited the research questions for this study and amended them as follows:

- a) how does construction of online class culture take place and what elements are involved in this activity?

And consequent to that question,

- b) how does the constructed nature of online culture impact on students' participation in online education?
- c) what are the crucial aspects of online culture that tutors need to take into consideration when teaching online?

Chapters Six, Seven and Eight will directly address these questions but first, in Chapter Four, I will discuss how I established a methodology for investigation of these research questions and, in Chapter Five, I will detail the data collected for this study and how they contributed to answering these questions.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Research methodology**

#### **4.0 Introduction**

This Chapter discusses methodologies for researching the nature of cultures constructed in online interaction. It serves as a preface to discussion, in Chapter Five, of the data collected for this study, their suitability and relevance to the research questions.

#### **4.1 Positioning research**

Traditionally, research studies are seen as positioned broadly in line with one of two oppositional categories, quantitative or qualitative. This positioning is based upon decisions made about the nature of the 'problem which is the focus of the research' (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003, p.34):

...the different assumptions of each research approach will not only influence the methodological approach selected but also the purpose of the research and the role of the e-researcher. (p.34)

The approach chosen will also impact on the nature of the outcomes of the investigation and what can subsequently be done with them.

Quantitative research studies are associated with scientific (i.e. experimental) research which generates largely structured (pre-classified) data, which are then subjected to statistical analysis in order to provide conclusions in the form of theory based on the properties of the variables investigated. Being statistically 'proven', results are seen as being reliable because they are replicable. They are thus generalisable beyond the confines of the research setting and can be used to establish causality and to predict behaviour in other, comparable, settings.

Qualitative research is associated with less regulated means of investigation which generate largely unstructured (i.e. non-numeric, non pre-categorised) data that seek to explain and elaborate the details of various kinds of human, especially social, activity, in terms of knowledge which is situated, partial and relative (Taylor, S., 2001 p.12). This knowledge is context specific and of local value so cannot be used to predict future human behaviour with any degree of certainty.

What results is the discovery of patterns and [the] development of theories that expand our understanding through narratives that “exploit the power of form to inform” (Eisner, 1981, p.7). The qualitative e-researcher interacts with the research using an in-depth inductive process and an emerging design that is identified during the research process. (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003, p.134)

The ‘binary’ tradition has been used to inform ideas of what may be considered suitable research methods for studies within particular disciplines. Most often quantitative methods have been associated with hard sciences, computing and technology, whilst qualitative methods have been favoured in social sciences, humanities and the arts. Education studies have a somewhat ambiguous tradition. Where studies of learning have been seen as cognitive science, quantitative methods have been favoured. Studies of learning as social activity, on the other hand, have tended to adopt more qualitative methods, such as ethnography, in order to describe the ways in which learning has taken place rather than how much learning has/has not occurred.

Increasingly, however, researchers in education have had to confront the idea that the polarisation of the binary quantitative/qualitative tradition has limited usefulness when it comes to understanding the complexities of the issues at work in most educational contexts. De Landsheere (1988) suggests that by the 1980s it was widely acknowledged that ‘no one research paradigm can answer all the questions which arise in educational research’ (p.15). Sfard, looking specifically at different metaphors for learning, concludes that ‘As researchers we seem to be doomed to live in a reality constructed from a variety of metaphors’; single ‘answers’ are available only on a local basis, ‘our work is bound to produce a patchwork of metaphors rather than a unified homogenous theory of learning’ (Sfard, 1998, p.12). Boulton & Hammersley argue:

... we do not think it is helpful to see qualitative and quantitative research as based on clearly distinct paradigms. Thus, we do not regard the use of structured or unstructured data as representing a commitment on the part of researchers to different research paradigms. We view both sorts of data as having varying advantages for particular research purposes. Which should be used depends in large part on the goals of the research and the circumstances in which these are to be pursued; and often the two sorts of data may need to be combined. (Boulton & Hammersley, 1996, p.283)

Walker and Evers, 1988, summarise these principles in what they term the 'unity' thesis: 'there is touchstone for judging the respective merits of different research traditions and bringing them into a productive relationship with one another'; by its very nature - addressing practical problems - educational research has 'a fundamental epistemological unity' (Walker & Evers, 1988, p.28). In other words, the nature of issues to be explored by educational research is diverse and requires a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Furthermore, these are not 'competing paradigms. In important ways they reflect a single research paradigm, they may not be perfect partners as they represent both different ends of this spectrum of activity but they are intimately connected' (Jones, 2004).

Studies of culture share some of the characteristics of studies in education. They range from quantitative studies, often based on survey techniques, such as those which offer 'proof' of essentialist characteristics of nationality-based categorisations discussed in Chapter Two, to ethnographic explorations of specific cultural groups or locations. Whilst a purely ethnographic approach to this study could have produced a detailed examination of the online classroom as a cultural context in which education happened, I was seeking to explore an educational context and how culture manifested itself within that context. Moreover, I was seeking to do so from a perspective (as detailed in Chapter Two) where culture is viewed as negotiated. My exploration would include an ethnographic focus in that I would be using the results of my own observations and experiences of being in the class (because I had been one of the tutors) to help interpret what was happening. This would be important in order that I as a researcher could appreciate what the context felt like to its users (Jones, 2001), but the study was not centred on these experiences.

Where then does this leave the present study? In terms of having declared its position as educational research (by choosing the online class as its frame for understanding), it would appear to align itself with the 'unity' thesis of Walker and Evers and, therefore, to require a methodology inclusive of a range of quantitative and qualitative data. A mixture of sources, including numerical and statistical data and messages, were available from the delivery platform which hosts the online class. These could be (and were) supplemented by qualitative data from interviews with students and staff. Choosing a methodology which could encompass all of these sources would build on other qualitative research outcomes in a field where much previous research had favoured more quantitative analysis. As Salmon has noted:

CMC studies for teaching and learning, when rooted in positivist perspectives can lead to research that is less sensitive to context and less suited to the exploration of meanings attributed by human actors to their purposes than are more qualitative approaches. (Salmon, 2002, p.197)

## **4.2 Positioning the present research**

### **4.2.1 Methodology - a grounded theorising approach**

The investigative approach known as grounded theorising is an inductive approach to research. Research activity and the theoretical understandings which it subsequently offers, is driven by, and grounded in, the data collected. Thus it may be seen as the opposite of a deductive approach (i.e. in the positivistic/ quantitative tradition), in which theory, in the form of a previously established critical standpoint, is developed before the research begins, usually in the form of a hypothesis, and is then tested by the research.

The process of grounded theorising was originally developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967) as a response to belief within the scientific community that, by lacking structure, qualitative analysis lacked rigour and thus reliability and validity and was therefore of limited value. Grounded theorising was presented as a means of getting robust theory from non-experimental data. Subsequently, different versions of grounded theorising have been developed, some as a result of continuing work by Glaser and Strauss – both together and, as individual differences of interpretation arose between them, with other authors. The principles which I used to guide and inform this study were similar to those used in my previous work (Hewling, 2002a) and were inspired by Strauss and Corbin's' 1998 'Basics of Qualitative Research' (second edition) - as opposed to any other version of the methodology.

The appeal of this methodology was that I could use a variety of data sources which would allow me to cross reference findings within the study, and I could also incorporate a variety of analytic techniques where data needed special attention: i.e. I would be able to look at message 'talk' using techniques from another eclectic methodology - discourse analysis - without this process disturbing the overall methodology. In particular I would use ideas from James Paul Gee (see 5.3.5 below). In this way the study would meet the aim of unity described above as desirable. Most importantly, this

approach did not require me to impose any existing theoretical framework on my data but, instead, would allow theoretical ideas to emerge from those data. I was seeking to explore a new area so the possibility that this methodology might result in the appearance of multiple stories was also attractive.

#### **4.2.2 How does grounded theorising 'work'?**

Put simply, grounded theorising begins without a theory or hypothesis but with a topic or theme (in this case culture) to be explored:

A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory... Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the "reality" than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.12)

Open-mindedness is especially important at the outset. The researcher does not need to be 'steeped in the literature' or what has gone before lest they may become 'constrained and even stifled by it' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.49). This does not mean that they must begin from a point of ignorance for, as Dey puts it, 'An open mind does not mean an empty head' (1995). The purpose is to lay aside approaches or explanations from existing literature and attempt to see things afresh.

Once the area of study has been determined, in the form of the initial research questions needed to address the purpose of the investigation, data are gathered from any, and potentially many, sources, such as the researcher deems, in light of ongoing analysis, useful and relevant to the area being investigated. Most often data will be of an 'unstructured' nature but it is also possible for the outcomes of quantitative investigation to be included. As data are collected, analysis of the data also begins. The two, data collection and analysis, continue alternately and in parallel, the fruits of analysis driving the nature and extent of further data gathering. So, for example, ideas arising in one interview might lead to reframing questions for the next interview, or to the choice of a different subject for the next interview.

When data have been prepared (e.g. interviews have been transcribed), analysis first involves a very close reading of the data. Once this has been done the researcher must make a note of (code) all 'topics or categories to which the data relate and which are relevant to the research

focus, or are in some other way interesting or surprising' (Boulton & Hammersley, 1996, p.290). The aim is to pull apart the data as widely as can be done and generate as many ideas and questions around the data as possible. In previous work I have illustrated the grounded theorising analysis and theory building process by invoking the image of a tree: 'At the leaves are concepts labelled as a result of meticulous examination of all items of raw data in order that all the possible ideas or concepts within it are labelled' (Hewling, 2002a, p.19). As the close examination proceeds, the widening achieved through coding will bring new perspectives. There may be aspects of the area under investigation which the researcher has not previously noticed; or inherent assumptions in the premise of the research will become apparent; or, coding may suggest new directions for investigation (Boulton & Hammersley, p.291). This stage of analysis will also allow patterns to appear. These patterns are not sought in order that they may be counted in any kind of quantitative way but, rather, they provide a means for the researcher to see 'whether these are typical sequences of events in a setting, or preoccupations around which a particular group's or individual's view of the world revolves' (op.cit. p.290). The emerging patterns may also highlight significant exceptions to the pattern or indicate gaps in the data collected so far. At this stage it is also likely that parts of different data dealing with the same theme will be brought together for review as a collection of perspectives on the same issue or occurrence. In terms of the tree, examination will reveal shoots and small branches with buds where groups of leaves grow together. While all of these processes are at work further data are collected, informed by the results of the coding that is taking place and the ideas those codes are generating.

Eventually, the researcher will begin to bring codes relating to commonly arising ideas together. This grouping may have a variety of origins and may arise from discovery of what Strauss & Corbin describe as 'in vivo' codes. These may also be described as '... 'insider' terms: words and abbreviations that are distinctive to the world that the informant inhabits, and which may appear strange to outsiders' (Boulton & Hammersley, 1996, p.291). At this point data collection slows down and more attention is paid to the properties and dimensions of codes in order to examine what part they may play in the processes and activities under examination. Attention is paid to the conditions under which things happen, are said, or otherwise make meaning. The extent of the branches of the tree is becoming clearer and some are seen to be stronger than others.



Sooner or later there comes a time when new ideas fail to emerge from examination of more, similar, data; leaves look like other leaves and there is little to distinguish new branches from those examined already:

In reality, if one looked long and hard enough, one always would find additional properties or dimensions...[in the data]. Saturation is more a matter of reaching the point in the research where collecting additional data seems counterproductive; the “new” that is uncovered does not add that much more to the explanation at this time. Or, as is sometimes the situation, the researcher runs out of time, money, or both. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.136)

During the final, theorising, stage of the analysis, attention focuses on the core categories - those which have the power to explain and predict. The trunk is now clearly defined as are the roots which underpin it. At this point literature also plays a role, being ‘used as an analytic tool if we are careful to think about it in theoretical terms’ (op.cit., p.47). This then enables the researcher to,

confirm findings **and**, just the reverse, findings can be used to illustrate where the literature is incorrect, is overly simplistic, or only partially explains phenomena (op.cit., p.52)

Use of literature also helps the researcher see how other theories and practices relate to the outcomes of the study. Returning once more to the tree, the full extent of the root network and its inter-relationships become clear. At this stage, the reflexivity (see 4.2.4 below), knowledge and experience of the researcher are critical since they give interpretive significance to what the data are offering. Finally, the writing of the research report places the research in the public domain and thus gives it value.

#### **4.2.3 Challenges presented by the use of grounded theorising**

In the ‘binary’ tradition the outcomes of qualitative research are seen to be partial and situated since they are not ‘scientifically’ proven; i.e., by being context-specific they are deemed not to be universal or widely generalisable. They may reflect what may be found in other contexts but this cannot be assumed. Instead, within a worldview which believes that truth is multi-dimensional, their value is in presenting a single dimension of reality which when added to outcomes from other investigations will help develop a wider three-dimensional picture.

A challenge for grounded theorising in this study, therefore, is to establish the effective worth of its outcomes; they need to be seen both as reasonable in terms of the local context they are drawn from and, beyond that context, they need to be seen to contribute usefully to wider understandings of culture in VLEs. As non-experimentally generated outcomes they will not be value-free but they will need to be defended as reasonable since they may be considered to suffer from reactivity – that is, the effects of possibly biased interference from a number of sources. These sources of reactivity may include myself as the researcher; the methods of data collection and analysis; and the participants in the research study (in this case, students and tutors).

#### **4.2.4 The researcher, reactivity and reflexivity**

Strauss and Corbin note the following as essential qualities in a grounded theorising researcher:

1. the ability to step back and critically analyze situations
2. the ability to recognize the tendency toward bias
3. the ability to think abstractly
4. the ability to be flexible and open to helpful criticism
5. sensitivity to the words and actions of respondents
6. a sense of absorption and devotion to the work process.

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.7)

Even if the researcher does have all these characteristics, however, there remains the situation that in determining what is, and is not, considered useful or important to the investigation, there is a degree to which the partialities or predilections of the researcher may influence, or even determine, the research outcomes. However, researcher reactivity is inherent in *all* research to a greater or lesser extent. Even in experimental investigation where researchers go to great lengths to ensure that their actions (and the consequences thereof) are removed as a variable in what subsequently happens, they have, nonetheless, been involved in deciding what should or should not be done. Later they will have had an impact on how the results are interpreted simply by deciding how the data are analysed or otherwise manipulated in order to produce comprehensible outcomes. Grounded theorising argues that this is, to a large extent, offset by the importance accorded to what the data themselves say. And, by ensuring that what the data are said to be saying is demonstrated clearly in the writing up of the research (by extensive use of the data itself), the process of analysis is given transparency. This transparency then allows the reader to judge

whether conclusions drawn are not only grounded in the data but are also plausible and credible – defined by Boulton & Hammersley (1996) as follows:

- *Plausibility*: the extent to which a claim seems likely to be true given its relationship to what we and others currently take to be knowledge that is beyond reasonable doubt, and
- *Credibility*: whether the claim is of a kind that, given what we know about how research is carried out, we can judge it to be very likely to be true. (p.283)

Arising from these ideas two issues were relevant to this study. Firstly, I had been a tutor on the courses investigated in the research (although not aware at the time that these data would subsequently be used for the study) and had, some years previously, been a student on the same programme. Secondly, I was familiar with, and at the time the data were generated (though not collected) was working as a tutor within, the institutional context from which the data have been drawn. This might therefore make it more difficult for me to see 'the strange in the familiar and the familiar in the strange' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p.207) and might result in me being unable to see, or accept, interpretations of the data which could be seen as conflicting with understandings accepted or expected from within that institutional context. However, this background experience of the context also gave me a valuable 'insider' viewpoint to bring to the interpretation of the data. It is also worth noting that I am no longer involved either with the course which provides the data in this study, nor connected in any way to the institution offering that programme and have not been so since before the research began. The research context being investigated is rooted in problems of practice which I identified in the course of being a student, and later whilst a tutor when putting remote-access online learning into action. This gives the investigation its practitioner relevance.

To minimise any negative aspects of researcher reactivity in this study three things have been done. My background and experience as they relate to this study have been explicitly stated. Also, I have attempted to keep a 'reflective journal' (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003, p.93), to encourage my continued awareness of potential conflicts of interest between my prior knowledge and the data I am dealing with in the study. This has encouraged me repeatedly to question what might be my influence on a particular issue or interpretation I might propose. It has also allowed me, where significant, to report the results of my deliberations in the writing up of the analysis and interpretation. This technique proved successful within the context of my previous work, in which examples from my journal were used in the writing up of data analysis (Hewling, 2002a, p.33).

And, finally, in the writing up of the study, as much data as practicably possible has been included in support of the claims I am making in order that the roots of these claims may also be seen.

There will always be some researcher influence on research, but, it will not necessarily be negative:

... neutrality is impossible because the researcher and the research cannot be meaningfully separated. The argument here is that a basic feature of social research is its reflexivity, namely the way that the researcher acts on the world and the world acts on the researcher, in a loop. If this is accepted, the researcher moves from the 'service' role of a faceless technician ... to a central and visible position. ... Doing this requires the researcher to be self-aware. It involves the imagined act of stepping back to observe oneself as an actor within a particular context. (Taylor, S., 2001, p.17)

This study maximises the most positive aspects of such self-awareness. My prior experience of the university from which the data are drawn enabled me to more easily gain access to the participants and the data; to frame the questions which the study seeks to address; and to assess, analyse and interpret the findings of the study. Furthermore, by using data from a context with which I was already familiar the study was operationalised more quickly and efficiently than would have been possible in an unfamiliar context. Likewise, actively calling upon my reflexivity, in the course of analysis of data in this study (in terms of my ability to draw on lessons from my prior experience as both student and tutor), has added depth to the interpretation I have been able to give to an area which, to date, has been little researched except in terms of theoretical frameworks imported from other disciplines and environments. Adopting all these techniques and attitudes offered the study the benefits of my 'insider' knowledge and allowed my background to be used as a resource for the study.

#### **4.2.5 Other sources of reactivity**

The actual procedures used to collect data in a research study may also be a source of reactivity – procedural reactivity. Particular issues surrounding the use of individual data collection tools are dealt with in greater depth in Chapter Five in the course of reporting on the data collected. However, the following comment (co-incidentally about interviewing), from Wilson, serves to illustrate a more general point with regard to the influence of data collection tools on a research study:

...the unstructured interview typically involves far less procedural reactivity than the standardized format of the interview schedule or the questionnaire; it appears to be more naturalistic, and it is so because the questions asked and the order in which they are asked flow from the respondent's replies rather than being entirely imposed by the interviewer's predetermined list of questions. (Wilson, 1996, p.113)

Likewise by using real (i.e. naturally occurring) discussion board data, for example (as opposed to setting up special online discussion groups only for the purpose of this study), validity of the outcomes of analysis of the boards is increased because they are shown to be unforced responses.

One proviso to this position is the way in which the contributions to those boards may possibly have been 'forced' with regard to how contributors felt constrained to use them in the process of being students or tutors on a course that required their use. It could be argued that since the students were also practising educators undertaking a course in educational practice, they may have framed their contributions in light of what they thought would demonstrate the 'good practice' they were expected to use (e.g. by employers and the university), regardless of whether or not this was their normal practice. Similarly, it is necessary to consider how students who were interviewed for this study might have framed their responses in light of how they had perceived my role as a tutor on the course in question. However, once again the real value to the study of using contributions from participants who were also educators is that it has maximised their own 'insider' knowledge. And, on occasions, this knowledge was valuable in several different ways. For example, Belinda, the other tutor on the course, had, as I had, previously been a student on the course. Her data, i.e. interview and discussion board contributions, were valuable not only as such but also because they gave a multi-view perspective and could thus be triangulated with my own multi-view perspective.

Procedural reactivity, as a source of interference in research outcomes resulting from the nature of the procedures used to collect data, *is* potentially an issue in this study but wariness of it must also be balanced against the constraints which can result in generation of an ever inward and limiting spiral provoked by looking for it. Wilson summarises the overall effect of issues of reactivity and validity from his own experience:

Validity, then, is a matter of trade-offs: between procedural and personal reactivity, and between reliable and less reliable methods. Whichever method of data collection is chosen, attention must be paid to the objectives of the research, and the methods adopted must be evaluated in this light. I had, for example, considered using highly structured methods of research for my study of the 40 respondents who had been in residential care, but I rejected this because it would have been impossible to have avoided the personal reactivity that would have followed from my knowing them since childhood. More importantly, I wanted *their* understanding of what it was like to be in care, and this would have been impossible without employing a method which allowed me to explore their memories using *their* meanings rather than to impose mine from the outset. (Wilson, 1996, p.119-120)

#### **4.2.6 Time, the final constraint**

I noted, at 4.2.2 above, that Strauss & Corbin suggest that data collection and analysis should continue until 'saturation' occurs. They acknowledge, however, that this concept requires a commonsense interpretation. They also acknowledge that constraints from outside the needs of the coding process may, in reality, determine a decision about the point at which investigation of data will end. They cite time and financial constraints as being two active ingredients in this process. For this particular study, the question of time was critical because the study had to be completed within the time frame of the degree awarding institution, because the study had to be completed by a single researcher, and because of the decision not to use computerised data analysis. I made this latter decision in the interests of getting closer to the data, of being able to see the full extent of the data not just what was appearing on a computer screen. I felt I needed to have physical contact with them, rather than have them mediated by electronic storage in a computer programme where I would only see them in the form of a printout or download. I also believed that this decision would maximise the quality of the interaction I could have with the data within the time constraints.

#### **4.2.7 Summarising the use of a grounded theorising methodology for this study**

In terms of the investigation of culture in the online classroom, a grounded theorising-based methodology offers flexibility with regard to multiple data sources. It also capitalises on use of the researcher's own background knowledge and experience. It does not require the imposition of any pre-existing theory but, rather, generates new data-based theory, at varying levels of complexity.

Furthermore, it may do so in response to multiple lines of enquiry and in response to the outcomes of ongoing analysis.<sup>1</sup>

The principle disadvantages of this methodology are related to time and to the PhD process. Allowing coding to reach 'saturation' can be a long process and there would not be an infinite amount of time available for this study due to the constraints of producing an academic thesis within a time frame beyond the researcher's control. Likewise, formal thesis requirements stipulate a word limit which constrains how much 'raw' data can be included, yet lack of these data may be seen to undermine the validity of the research since it may restrict readers in using their own judgement to assess the merit of the analysis and the conclusions drawn.

There were also a number of risks involved in this methodology. Although it seemed likely, from my previous experience, that the data available and collected would be productive there was no guarantee that this would be so. There were considerable constraints on collecting some data since the classes to be investigated had already taken place and there were issues involved in seeking ethical approval and permissions on a 'post hoc' basis. Finally, in this methodology data collection is not a linear process but somewhat rambling and iterative which may lead to several possible 'stories' or theoretical outcomes; 'controlling' these into a coherent outcome is challenging within the constraints of a linear thesis format. I note an example of a second story appearing – which became a separate conference paper - in Chapter Five (see 5.2.1).

Ultimately, the advantages of this methodological approach outweighed the disadvantages and risks for me because this research is not seeking an 'absolute' answer, nor does it begin or end with a hypothesis or an attempt at proof. Instead, the research questions driving the study seek to explore new possibilities by opening up understandings:

- a) how does negotiation of online class culture occur?
- b) what elements are active in the negotiation?
- c) how does the negotiated nature of online class culture impact on students' participation in online education?

And, in light of the responses to these questions,

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<sup>1</sup> And for me this methodology had the added advantage of having proved its worth in my earlier work for the MScRMET.

- d) what are the crucial aspects of online culture that tutors need to take into consideration when teaching online?

As Warschauer reports of his own use of this methodology, the purpose of the investigation is, not to provide a single definitive answer but rather to open new forms of conversation and to encourage the process of reflecting on them. (1999, p.197)

### **4.3 Issues of access and ethics**

#### **4.3.1 Access**

Data used in this study came from 2002 Semester Two and Semester Three offerings of the same course at an Australian University. Both classes studied the same content which was delivered by the same teaching team. I had been a student on this course in 2000 and, in 2002, was recruited as a member of the tutor team for the course. I sought permission to use platform-recorded data from the Course Team Leader and from the Faculty in which the course was based. Those permissions imposed conditions on the use, and extent, of the data that could be collected. The sample permission form at Appendix One indicates how these issues were placed before the students. The most important issues for the Faculty related to the use of data already collected by the delivery platform since this was deemed as being held for a specific purpose only (the running of the class) which did not include my research. Interview data, on the other hand, were to be newly collected specifically for my study so would be subject to negotiation of an agreement for use for research, between myself and individual students, from the outset.

I selected student interview subjects purposively from amongst those who agreed to give access to their platform data in order to include both Australians and non-Australians, and some students who had also had experience of teaching online. Other interview subjects were selected as analysis moved forward and study of message data revealed items of interest. As discussed in Chapter Five I made a positive decision not to include non-native speakers of English in interviews although login and message data from these students was collected (see the end of section 5.4.2).

#### **4.3.2 Ethical Issues**

The ethical guidelines which impact upon this study are provided by the British Educational Research Association, at the heart of which is stated:



The Association considers that all educational research should be conducted within an ethic of respect for

- The Person
- Knowledge
- Democratic Values
- The Quality of Educational Research
- Academic Freedom

(BERA, 2002, p.5)

I also paid attention to the guidelines prepared by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2002).

The specific controls imposed by the University on data collected by the Platform have been mentioned at 4.3.1 above. Interview data however, since it was not collected by the University or on its behalf, was not subject to the same constraints. The University's concern over anything done or said in interviews was very limited since, from the point of view of their guidelines, they were involved only in so far as they gave the researcher permission to use a limited amount of information gathered in the course of her normal work (i.e. students' email addresses) in order to contact students and request their participation in interviews. The only condition imposed by the university on that contact was that I should specify to students that this was research being done outside the remit of the University, was in no way connected to the University and would not have any bearing, positive or negative, on their studies or the results of their studies with the University. Data were used only with permission of the students concerned and all reporting of data and results of analyses were made anonymous by use of numbers or pseudonyms. The platform generated data were used mainly in the early stages of the study but also later for cross-referencing with interview data.

#### **4.4 Chapter summary**

In this chapter I have considered the positioning of this research study as the investigation of an educational issue. I have also explained how a grounded theorising-inspired methodology was chosen for the research because it is a broadly qualitative methodology, flexible enough to allow data to be gathered from multiple sources and well suited to this study which is investigating a

situation identified in the course of practice. The purpose of the study is not to attempt a defence of a particular position or theory, i.e. a re-travelling of an apparently pre-existing path, but, rather, it is exploration without a map, in order to understand better the cultural landscape of the online class. This chapter also looked at the possible impacts for the study, negative and positive, of my experience and prior knowledge. Finally the chapter considered issues of access to data and the ethical considerations associated with the study.

## Chapter Five

### Dealing with data: processes of collection and analysis

#### 5.0 Introduction

In Chapter Four I described how, having positioned this study as educational, a grounded theorising-inspired methodology was particularly appropriate. This methodology was chosen for its flexibility and because I felt it would offer the greatest potential for exploration of a context – the negotiation and practice of culture in the online class - which has not previously been well explored and for which little theory presently exists. According to the principles of grounded theorising the nature of the data used in a study will not be pre-ordained but each new collection of data will be in response to the questions raised by analysis of the previously collected data. Likewise, there will be no critical mass of data to be collected; the amount collected will be that required to reach saturation of coding. The researcher will start by collecting from a source which they feel will begin to open up the area being investigated; the needs of the research questions thus have to drive the choice of data used (Boulton and Hammersley, 1993), within the parameters of what is available and accessible.

This chapter looks at the data that were available for this study and how I used them within the grounded theorising approach: to offer up ideas and to provide triangulation – verifying the ideas from one kind of data by comparing them with outcomes from another kind of data.

#### 5.1 Locating suitable data

In 2001-2002 I taught three presentations of the same online course on a masters in education programme for an Australia-based, but globally recruiting, university. Later in 2002, when I was seeking data for my research it became clear that material from those courses might be suitable. I concentrated on the second and third presentations of the course since they featured identical course materials, and the same members of teaching staff and an identical configuration of online resources, discussion boards, etc. Fifty eight students (i.e. all of both classes) were contacted and asked if they would participate in the study. Twenty seven offered access to their delivery platform-recorded data and twenty six offered to take part in interviews. In actual fact only 15 were finally interviewed along with one non-teaching member of university staff. Students were geographically

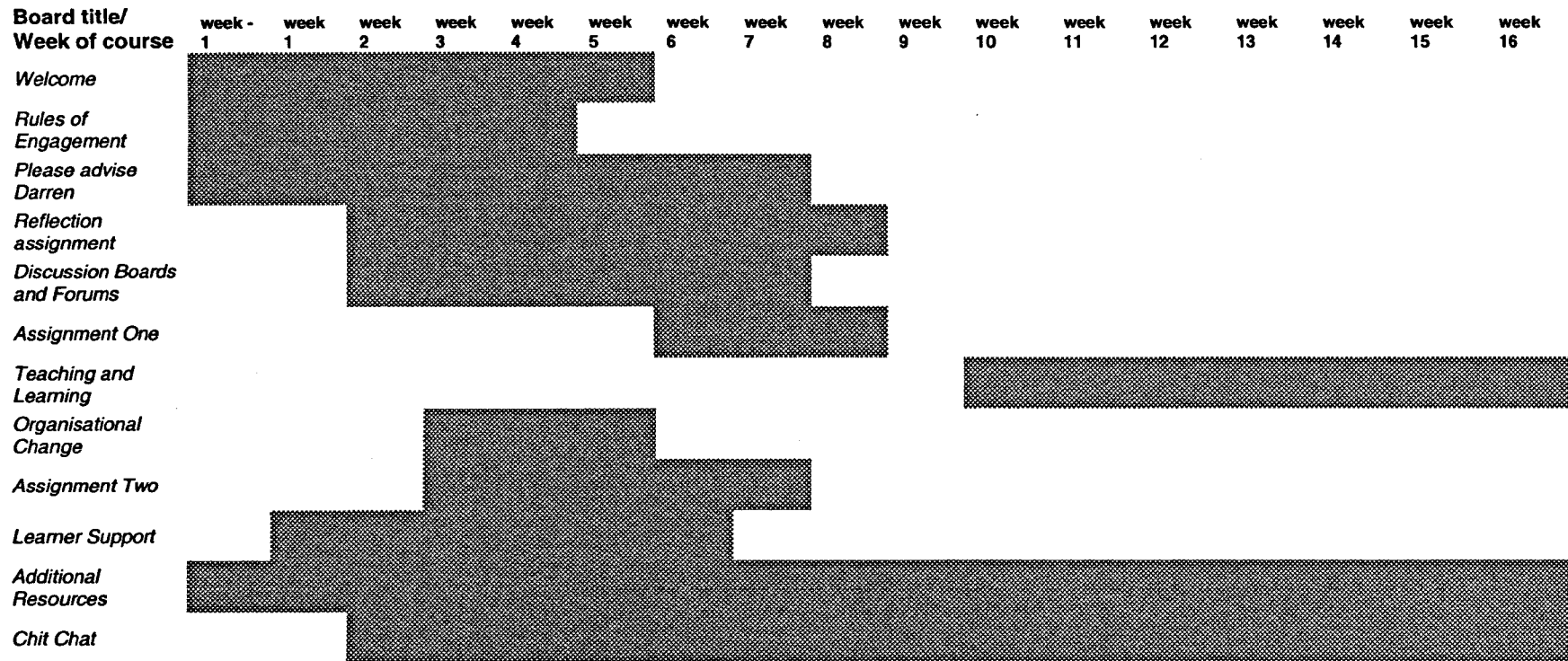
located in Australia and New Zealand; Europe; the Middle East and South East Asia. There were three tutors located in the USA, Australia and the UK.

For any student working through the process of doing one of the classes I looked at there are a number of stages through which to progress. Potentially each of these, as detailed below, offered data for my investigation.

*Gaining access* – having identified the programme as suitable, students need to apply for admission. They must also arrange reliable access to the Internet and, once registered, must succeed in using their university ID number and password to enter the course web pages. They need to download and store on their own computer, or print off, course modules, readings and the course guide. When they log on to the website for the first time they must read the messages posted by the tutors and post a welcome message of their own to introduce themselves to the rest of the class. During this stage the delivery platform records potentially useful data on student activity in terms of who is registered for the course; who logs in; how often they log in; the pages they access and the welcome message(s) they post – if any. There is no data recorded on how pages are used and what, if anything, is downloaded. There is no information either about what students think they are supposed to be doing; how they determine what they should do, or any details about them apart from their names and anything included in their messages.

*Participating in the class* – students are offered a number of discussion spaces online where they are encouraged to debate relevant topics with other students by means of posting messages and responding to those of others. This activity is not compulsory but is 'strongly encouraged' by the Course Team Leader and his two assistant tutors. Prompts to start discussion are offered in line with course themes. Themes also arose from within ongoing interaction. The timeline of discussion board topics and other online activity for this course is shown in Fig 5.1. Some interaction between participants can take place though personal emails but tutors generally discourage this in order that all participants may have the benefit of discussions by seeing them in public areas. By focusing interaction on these discussion boards participants will have the chance to interact, the chance to receive responses, and thus to receive recognition of their existence within the class as a whole. Students also need to read core course materials and a number of prescribed articles and other documents. They are encouraged to seek supplementary material from the University library (a

direct link to the online resources of the university is available for them from the course web pages) and the Internet in general. They are also invited to share resources they find elsewhere by posting details to a discussion board specifically devoted to such material. Throughout all this activity the delivery platform records logins (but not what is done during periods online except in terms of pages visited); also messages posted to discussion forums by both tutors and students. Messages used as data in this study could demonstrate how students tackled certain activities, e.g. responding to tutors and to other students. Messages could also reveal background information on students, the places and contexts in which they worked and, sometimes, accounts of how they had approached, or anticipated approaching course work. In sum, for the purposes of this study, 'the written transcript is a document that points toward but does not entirely capture the ongoing social event that the conference is for its participants' (Jones, 1998, p.31). Beyond messages, users can email directly from the delivery platform although these emails are not recorded by the platform. Likewise, there was no way of accessing any message interaction between class members who had email, or other contact, outside of the class unless they themselves chose to volunteer information about this interaction.



Notes:

- 1 Shaded areas indicate weeks of the course during which messages were posted to discussion forums with particular titles.
- 2 All boards were usually available throughout the period of the course
- 3 Within the boards dealing with assignments there were sub-boards for each tutor group – these could only be accessed by those in any particular tutor group.

**Figure 5.1** Discussion Board Timeline

*Assessment* – there are three pieces of formally assessed work for these students. Submission points are spread throughout the chronology of the course and there are options for deferring submissions for up to a semester subject to negotiation with the Team Leader. In order to submit work and receive feedback students need to be able to use the course web pages to upload and download files and must be familiar with the use of the 'comments' facility within Word. For the first assignment they are asked to post their work on a designated discussion board and to offer comments through that board on the submissions of others. All assignments are marked in accordance with a marking guide which is available to students while they are preparing their submissions. As throughout the course, the platform records logins and discussion board messages as well as recording any items uploaded or downloaded via a drop-box facility which is provided for submitting assignments. Those assignments which were posted up on boards for discussion were accessible for analysis but assignments posted formally, via the dropbox, although visible to all tutorial staff, were not available as data for this study.

The delivery platform data concerning who logs into the class pages (and those for the two tutorial groups into which the class is divided for some activities), and how often they do so, as well as the records of all messages posted, are the most useful kinds of data held by the delivery platform. Furthermore, data are pre-collected and 'pre-transcribed' (Paolillo, 1999) since, unlike f2f conversation, there is no need to make a written record of the interaction; the delivery platform does this automatically. Numerical/statistical analysis of usage information is easy to generate using inbuilt collection facilities available to those, like myself, who have tutor access to the platform. But, while these two sources offered a lot of potential for this study, there was also a need for some means of enquiring of students how they used the platform and how they undertook certain activities. Some such data might be obtained from a survey of students, but interviewing them would offer me the further benefit of being able to seek elaboration on points of interest that they raised which would not be possible in a survey.

The remainder of this chapter reports the specific roles, and limitations, of the three main data sources in this study. These are: platform-recorded report data (automatically generated reports from the VLE showing information about participants' use of VLE features); message data

(transcripts of all participant posted messages); and interviews (interviews conducted with selected class members and tutors specially recoded for this study). It also reports on how analysis of these data were used together in generating the overall outcomes for the study.

## **5.2 Platform generated statistical report data**

These data are generated by the delivery platform itself using information it has gathered automatically. Generic examples of the formats produced by the platform are shown below as Figures 5.2-5.5. 'Accesses' in these diagrams refers to the number of logins recorded; in 5.2 this is in relation to each of the four areas of the platform while in other figures they are totals for all areas combined. These data are often referred to as student tracking data since their purpose, as determined by the producers of the delivery platform, is to enable tutors to monitor the activity and progress of students. The data are collected by using tools located in the 'Control Panel' area of the platform which is accessible only to tutors and administrative staff. A front page to the facility offers options to access this data according to user (single, selected group or full group); period (from single day to course duration – with or without extension period); time of day; and day of the week. No option is offered for how data should be displayed (e.g. pie-chart, bar chart, etc.); this is decided by the platform. Accesses are shown in terms of actual numbers of accesses to each of the four basic platform areas: communications (e.g. discussion boards, email); content (study materials, student activities, etc.); group (small-group discussion boards); and student (study support functions, library access, referencing guide etc.) as well as percentages of total accesses to the four areas and the pie chart version of those percentages.



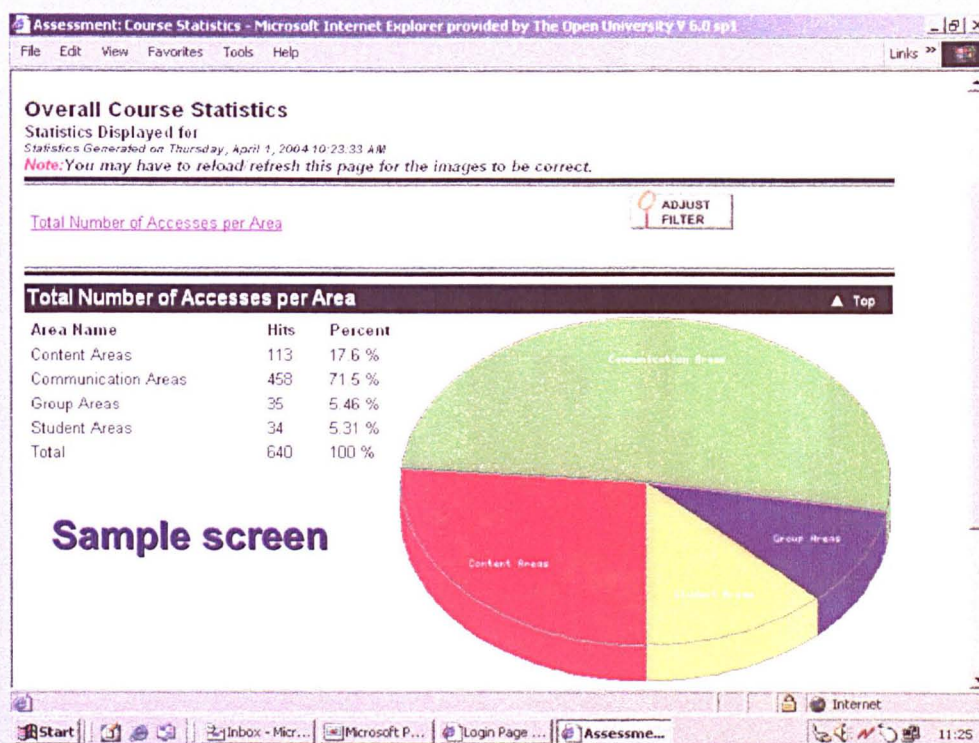


Figure 5.2 Sample of pie-chart analysis

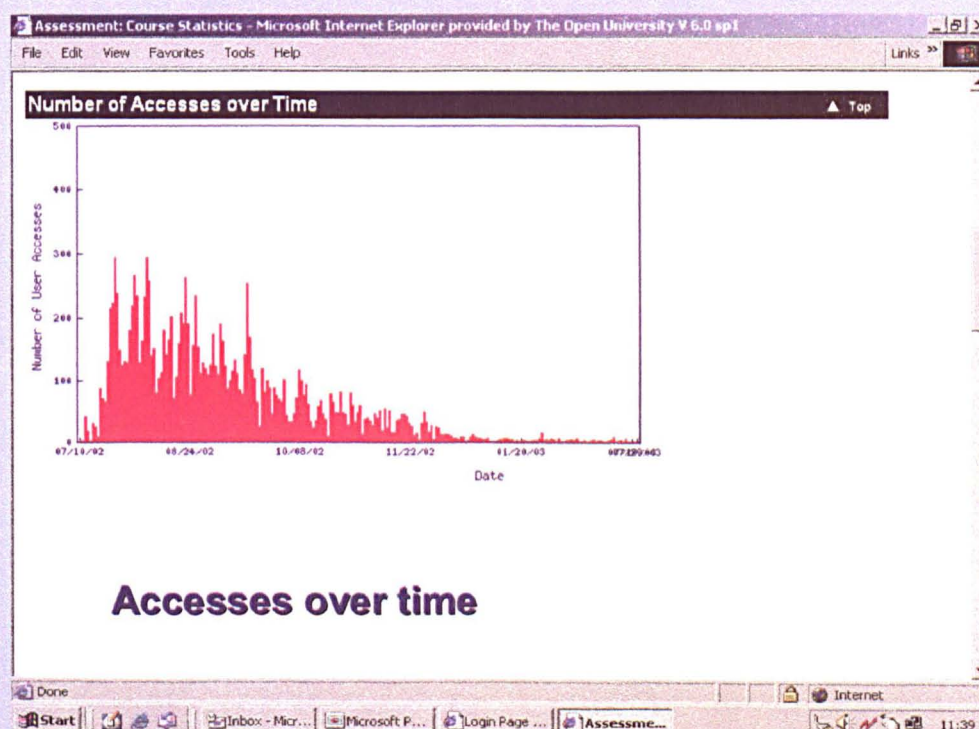


Figure 5.3 Sample bar chart of total accesses to the course over time

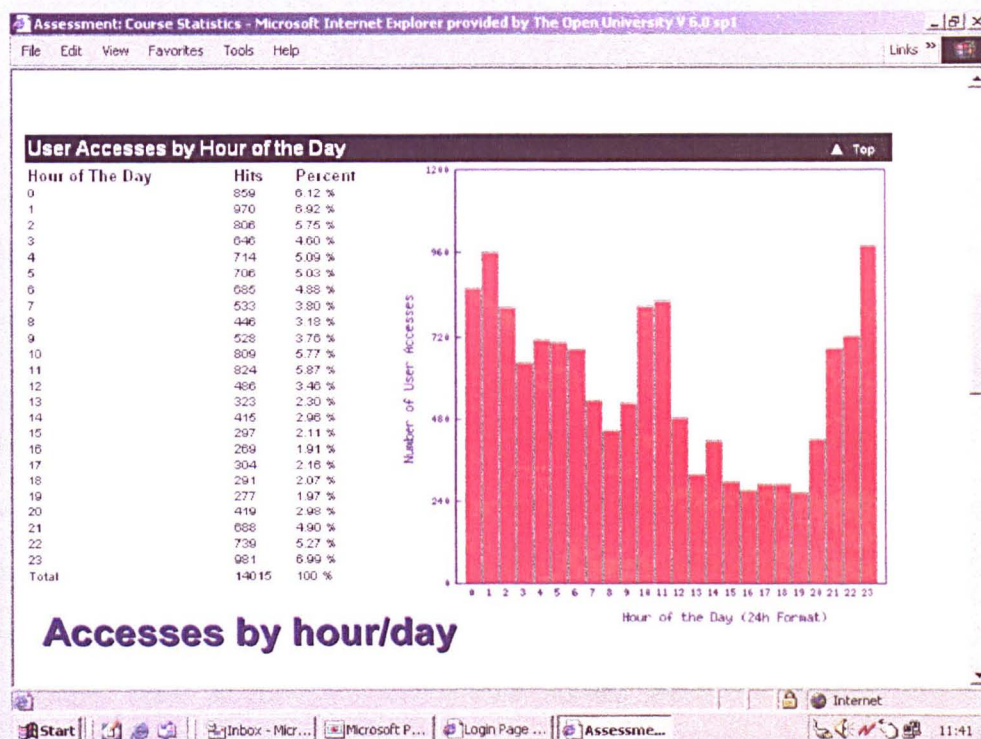


Figure 5.4 Sample bar chart of accesses by hour/day

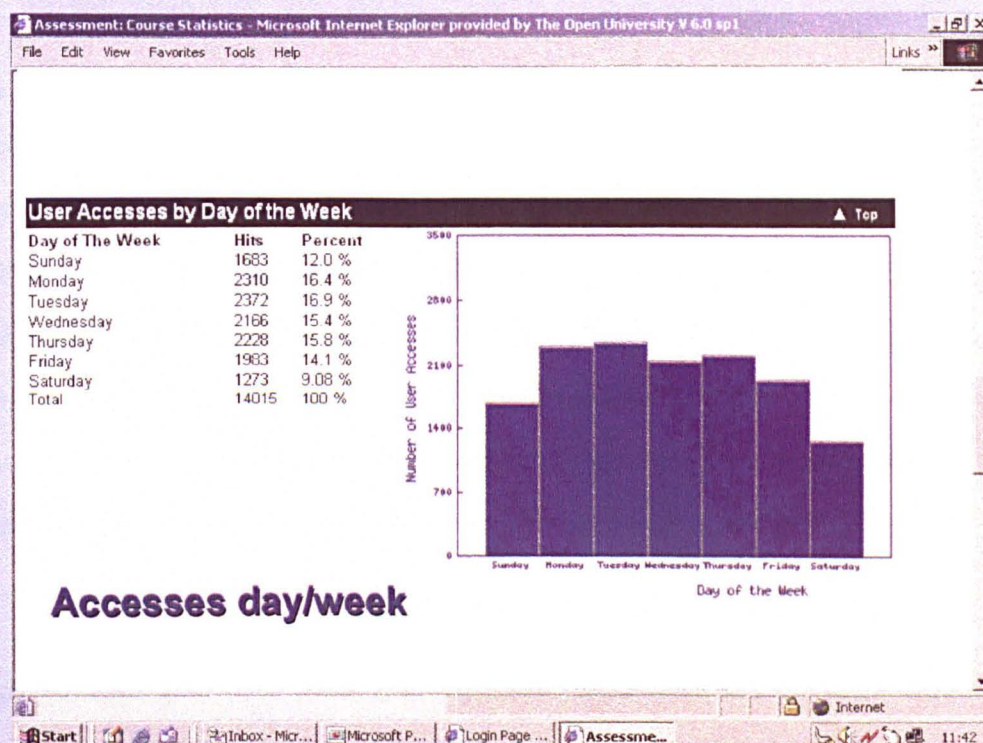


Figure 5.5 Sample bar chart of accesses by day of the week over whole course duration



To establish what potential this platform-collected data might have for contributing ideas to my study, and to establish any problems associated with using such data, I requested a selection of reports for one of the classes to which I had access for the research, using the 'Control Panel' facility. The reports detailed overall use of the four general areas, both by the class as a whole and by individual students within the class. The reports produced few conclusions in themselves, except in so far as they suggested that the platform was used, i.e. accessed, in different ways by different students.

In particular, there seemed to be a difference in patterns of logins and in areas of the platform that were accessed. Records for individual students showed a number for whom accesses to discussion areas were considerably higher than accesses to other areas of the platform. When cross referenced with other information available about those students (including information about students' place of residence during their studies given in messages posted to the welcome message discussion board) it appeared that, in broad terms, students who were 'local' - i.e. Australian and living in Australia (where the university is based) at the time of their studies - accessed discussion areas much less than those who were not. This apparent difference was useful in suggesting further areas for exploration, and in order to see whether this differential use was apparent in the number and nature of messages these groups posted to discussion boards, I collected further data (see below for details) using the 'collect all messages' function from within the student tools built into the Platform. The results of quantitative and qualitative analysis of both these sets of data were written up as a conference paper (Hewling, 2003). It seemed that there was some association between where students were living (geographically) when doing their studies and the proportion of their accesses which were to discussion areas. I was also interested that the association did not necessarily follow in terms of nationality; i.e. some of the remotely located students who were using the discussion areas a lot were studying from outside Australia but were also Australian. (This is discussed further in 5.2.1 below).

### **5.2.1 Limitations on the use of platform generated statistical report data**

The main conclusions I drew from evaluating these data were that there are limitations to the reliability of data generated using the tutor tools. In fact, if used without care (but as intended by

the manufacturers) to monitor student online behaviour, outputs can be very misleading. The critical issues in interpreting platform-recorded data, for any purpose, were as follows.

- The platform can 'see' activity only in terms of 'hits' (i.e. it records only that a page or area has been accessed) and does not record how long is spent on any one page or area, such that;
- Even when the Platform does 'see' activity, it has no means of evaluating the significance of that activity (e.g. it records every access to a page as evidence of use of that page even though the page may have been accessed by mistake, may have been a gateway to accessing the page that was really being sought, or may have been accessed but never used).

Also, unless the platform is programmed carefully - which was beyond the control of this researcher - the platform is so zealous in its search for activity that it may record apparently relevant activity even when that activity is not, in fact, relevant (e.g. when asked for a report of overall class activity it carefully included logins by technical and administrative staff in its analysis).

- The platform cannot record, even in terms of hits, what it does not 'see' (e.g. activity which could be done online but which is actually done offline - such as the study of content materials which have been downloaded or printed out, and are read away from the screen).
- Even in terms of what it does 'see', i.e. accesses, the platform 'pre-digests' simple log-in numbers into percentages thus obscuring what little information it really can usefully offer. For example diagrams and figures offered to tutors using the tracking facility are percentages - relative to each other and to 100% - not actual incidents of activity. Consequently, a figure of 50 (%) for use of content pages may simultaneously mean very little activity for a student with a total of 20 logins to the course, and a great deal of activity for a student with a total of 200 logins to the course. When this information is given as a pie-chart it may be deceptive since the images for both these possibilities will look, in shape, the same.
- Finally, automatic collection of data is, potentially at least, subject to technical problems and cannot be guaranteed accurate.

In the later stages of analysis, and once I had begun analysis of interviews, it became clear just how critical some of these shortcomings could be in terms of the quality of information these reports (automatically generated for tutors) can offer, and thus how well they represent actual student behaviour. I have noted above that the report data suggested that there might be a correlation between student location and use of different areas of the platform. I explored this in interviews by asking students which platform areas they had used and which areas had been most useful to them. It quickly became clear that student explanations of their behaviour did not fit with the data the platform generated. Most notably, many students downloaded large parts of content material on to desktops, or printed it off, so that most of their use of the content areas went unnoticed by the delivery platform and thus was unrecorded by the logins register. The matter of study location was also very revealing. Some of the students who downloaded materials reported doing so because their Internet connection speeds were very slow and this also deterred them from participating in discussions. Most of these students were based in locations in Australia. Others who had used materials online and had also participated a lot in discussions reported having Broadband and other fast connections. One of these students was in South Korea, another in Malaysia. Any tutor who assumed, as suggested by the platform manufacturers, that they could adequately monitor student activity by use of student tracking tools could be seriously misled by this critical aspect of platform behaviour.

More critical still, a tutor who assumed that by knowing that use of content areas was underrepresented numerically (and thus graphically) by the platform, might also assume that where the pie chart of platform use for a particular student showed a low usage for content areas (that is, course materials and readings), the student was happily working away on content off line and concentrating their online efforts on communications (i.e. discussion boards). Such a pie-chart profile *could* indicate that this was the student's pattern of activity but unless the numbers, as opposed to percentages, of communications logins were checked, it might mean something quite different. One student interviewed showed this pattern of activity according to the platform recorded data. The student had only ever accessed the platform a total of 3 times and went unnoticed to tutors as a 'student in distress' because tutors did not realise that, in this case, the platform was unable to demonstrate what was actually happening. The student's tutor,

on the other hand, felt she had a better understanding of how her students were learning online because 'I was witness to a process not a product' (**Belinda**, course tutor, in interview).

While this finding was not entirely relevant to the main purpose of this study, writing up the conclusions from the integration of the two sets of data (usage statistics and interviews) provided me with not only another tool to help interpret some of the interview data, but also material for a conference paper (Hewling, 2004b). The external interest shown in this small aspect of the overall research study (by those involved in development of learner management systems (LMS) and by others involved in quality assurance) illustrates well the way in which grounded theorising encourages multiple, and multi-faceted, 'stories' to appear from any one investigation of a particular set of data (see 4.2.7 above).

### **5.2.2 Summarising the use of platform-generated statistical report data**

The platform usage data were extremely good, in analytic terms, for generating questions, and thus ideas, for me to explore by means of further data collection using other data sources. These questions also encouraged me to explore the properties and dimensions of all the analytic categories these data generated. Likewise they helped to move the study on by pinpointing questions which might be asked of students in interview. In their own right the platform data contributed to the study too, by supporting the assumption that understanding culture in the online class was more complex than simply associating students' activity with their national origins. Also, because the data suggested that the platform itself, (in the way it functions – see Chapter 7, section 7.2) and through it, those who were (notionally) 'in control' of it (see 7.6), were both cultural influences affecting how students (and other users) experienced the online class facilitated by that platform.

### **5.3 Asynchronous discussion board messaging**

I have shown, above, how the delivery platform records logins and other manifestations of student use of its facilities. The platform also records all the 'conversations' that take place within the online classroom since it stores all messages posted to discussion boards. The long-term availability of past interactions is posited by some as being advantageous to student learning since it permits students to revisit and reflect upon 'old' conversations - potentially indefinitely. This is particularly, but not exclusively, useful for students who are not native

speakers of the language of instruction and for those students who otherwise do not feel confident about their understanding of the course content. Login data showed patterns of post-course activity for some students and, in interview, several mentioned having returned to course discussions and content materials since officially completing the course, not least because time pressures whilst they were doing the course had prevented them from reading everything then. In the short term, the permanence of message records also allows students to take time to reflect before responding to the utterances of others. In this way they may organise their thoughts and craft their contribution (i.e. their replies), carefully - something which cannot happen in the f2f classroom. In interviews this feature was widely reported as being extremely important to the majority of users as they saw it as giving them control, although few seemed to be aware of how illusory this control might actually be and consequently of how distorted their view of the current state of interaction might be, given the way in which the platform intervened (see 7.2).

In the course of the study data were collected from eight (of a total of 24) discussion boards, four from each semester. Boards contained between 50 and 200 messages each. Platform-recorded messages from discussion boards offer a rich resource for research too. Firstly, messages can be counted and mapped against particular participants, topics, etc. They can also be categorised according to type: e.g. initial messages, responses, informative messages, interrogative messages, and so on. Secondly they can be considered with regard to where they fit into particular conversations (i.e. within 'threads') in terms of their purpose (continuing theme, generating theme, seeking confirmation, etc.). Thirdly there is the literal content, i.e. they can provide a statistical profile of the interaction taking place. This illustrates what is discussed in the class, the kinds of replies received in response to particular 'prompts', the complexity (or simplicity) of interactions and the kind of language used by posters and respondents. Message content can also be analysed in a number of ways, as I detail in the sections below. Messages can provide information about authors. The words used in messages may be analysed in terms of what they 'do', their purpose, in discursive terms, within the thread context, the class context, etc. Finally, all these uses of message data may cross reference to contribute to exploring, confirming or refuting themes emerging from other sources of data. I used message data in all of these ways at different points in this study.

### 5.3.1 Message purpose and efficiency

Some of my initial review of asynchronous messaging involved simply counting the messages by author, by recipient and by group. This proved useful when I looked at the results in conjunction with statistical data of logins. I have noted (above 5.2) that on the basis of the login data there was an association between students' location at the time of their studies and their activity when on line, such that those located geographically farther from the University made more use of communications areas within the delivery platform, although there was no proof of the exact nature of this association since this conclusion was not reached by means of analysis of a statistically significant sample. Simple counting of messages confirmed this pattern in terms of the numbers of messages posted to discussion boards. For example, on one board for semester two 42 of the 64 messages posted came from the 14 members of the class who were not local to the University whilst only 22 of those posted came from the remaining 20 members of the class. Across a variety of discussion boards average numbers of messages posted by remote students exceeded average numbers of postings by local students by anything from two to seven times. It was also clear that, whether remote or local, most of the messages posted were only ever from a small number of students and, moreover, use of all boards tapered off over the period of the course (specifics of this analysis are reported in Hewling, 2002 and in Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005). For me, this highlighted an area which needed further investigation. The most obvious way to do this was in interviews with students and I added a section of questions to the interview schedule in order to achieve it (see 5.4.2 below). Meantime I gave further attention to examining the messages themselves to see whether there were any patterns within them which might offer some clarification of these ideas.

In terms of apparent *purpose* (derived from analysis of explicitly stated content) messages fell into four broad categories (see also 6.3.2-4 for examples and further discussion). These were:

- *direct* (response only to the stated task of this particular board)
- *support* (response supporting another message on the board, not directly to the stated task of the board)
- *elaborate* (message sought only to expand on the immediately previous message)
- *self* (message seemed not to be addressed to, or responding to, any activity or message or person but was recording the author's thoughts).



All messages were also coded *moving on* when they contained an overt suggestion that might move the discussion forward, or when they directly invited further comment from the rest of the group. A pattern emerged: remote students posted more messages in the *support* and *elaborate* categories and many of these were also *moving on* messages. Since this group was posting more messages overall this was not entirely surprising, but average message numbers per student were also higher. This raised the question of how students perceived the purpose of discussion boards and provided yet another item for me to explore in interviews.

My final exploration of messages at this point in the study was to consider the success of messages, in terms of whether or not they received the kinds of response the authors seemed to expect. Firstly I looked at whether or not messages were addressed to anyone specifically, generally, or to no-one in particular. Overall, if messages were addressed to someone in particular, or if they contained a question or an active invitation to respond (e.g. 'what do others think?'), it seemed that they were responded to. However, it was not possible to draw many conclusions from these data since even if a message did receive a response it was not clear whether this was the one expected, particularly if the original message had had an end which encouraged a response but the message had not been specifically addressed to anyone in particular. Likewise, if a message got a response from someone but not from the person it was addressed to, did this matter? In many cases it was easy to make assumptions about what authors had intended but there was no way of testing these from the messages alone. This analysis did however serve to move the study forward by highlighting the probable importance of many questions about the nature and purpose (i.e. the patterns) of interaction in the online class which had arisen so far. In particular, how do students view the purpose of online discussion; who do they expect to be involved in it; does it matter to them who is involved in it, and how did they react to the different types of responses they got (or didn't get)? As had occurred with the platform login data, messages offered me data in their own right: themes for interviews and possibilities for triangulation with future interview data.

### **5.3.2 Welcome messages**

Looking at messages posted to introductory boards (where students present their welcome messages to the class) provided background information about the students in the class as well

as proving useful in suggesting ways in which examination of the messages could go beyond overt content. Patterns appeared in terms of the styles of language and presentation that were used, and how use of a particular style by one student seemed to lead to similar use by other students.

I collected a sample of welcome messages by using the 'collect all' messages function<sup>1</sup> from the front page of the 'Welcome Aboard' discussion board. The sample comprised the welcome messages posted by 11 students from Semester Three and 12 students from Semester Two. Analysis across the whole sample of 23 students showed three categories of information presented in each introductory message: employment/professional information; family and personal information; and expectations/feelings about the course and being online. Mirroring of message layout, content and tone was very evident, especially although not exclusively, amongst Semester Three students; each successive arrival online mirroring the welcome of the previous one. This was particularly evident in message endings which went to great lengths to draw others into a group with the writer, e.g. 'Looking forward to this journey together with you all' (**Graham**); 'E-mail me anytime about anything' (**Oscar**); 'Talk to you later' (**Michael**); 'Feel free to contact me' (**Nigel**); 'It's lonely here sometimes, so drop me a line' (**Simon**). Amongst Semester Two students messages were much longer and generally more heavily weighted with detail of the student's professional background. This latter observation led me to question how students might determine what was appropriate content for these messages. In particular, to consider whether or not the differences between the classes was in some way a reflection of how the online culture was perceived by students as they arrived online and what kinds of expectations and experiences might influence these perceptions. In interpreting the data I looked at how they compared with data from a study in Canada (Chase et al, 2002 referred to in Chapter 2.3) which had also reported on how students present themselves in online welcome messages. My data showed very similar patterns, in terms of the criteria (job title, geographic location, and personal circumstances) used by students to reference and position themselves through their messages. Chase et al. concluded that the priority given to each of these categories of information related directly to the writer's cultural origins. However, in the case of my data, I considered the positioning of the information to offer a reflection of how individuals

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike the login data which is accessible only to tutors via the 'Control Panel', compilations of messages can be collected by anyone who has access to the board in question.

wished to prioritise aspects of their lives to present themselves to their classmates. This might, or might not, be directly influenced by ideas of how they felt they should present themselves drawn from their culture of origin.

### 5.3.3 Message addressivity

Message data were a source to which I returned repeatedly throughout analysis - especially as themes re-arose in other different kinds of data, e.g. interviews. 'Message success' was one such theme. I had first considered message success in relation to purpose, as noted at 5.3.2 above. I later investigated it in terms of to whom messages were addressed; the forms of address that were used; whether there was any evidence of how decisions on this had been made, indeed whether any overt address was needed or offered. In interviews students repeatedly stressed how critical it was to them to receive responses to their messages, to stem their fears about 'being alone' and being unrecognised. I found messages to be most effective at getting replies when addressed to a specific person by name, but this was not an essential pre-requisite to receiving a response. Some messages used 'generic' greetings such as 'Hi All' and many did not use addresses at all, although what I was hearing in interviews suggested that often students did have a particular person in mind as an addressee. It seemed that a variety of precedents were being used by students in deciding how to address messages. One student in Semester Three, **Jonathan**, provides an example of the many influences and dilemmas at play (e.g. perceived/assumed social status). An outline annotated summary of macro-level analysis of his data can be found at Appendix Two.

I also did some micro-level analysis of messages. In these analyses *what* was being said in messages was considered in relation to *how* it was being said. I also considered how the writer was positioning him or her self, and others, and how all of these things might be impacting on the class as a cultural context. This approach to message data was a precursor to the discourse analysis described at 5.3.5 below. A sample from micro analysis of **Jonathan's** data is presented below as Figure 5.6. In this sample I was identifying and interpreting how his use of language positioned him and how it reflected ideas and patterns picked up from interaction around him. His use of the terms "the dance", "lead steps" and "follow up steps", for example,

picked up on the metaphor of "the dialogic dance" set up by the Course Team Leader as the title for the particular discussion board he is posting to.

Hello All,[a1]

I agreed with what many of you had said before regarding "A good posting is...", [a2]and now as we are past the second week[a3] of the dance, I wish to make a conclusion[a4].

As we've gotten into the "dancing", I can see how some posts are like "The lead" in the footwork and some are like "follow up" steps. Without both, our discussions would be nonproductive.

Basically what I'm saying, is that there are two general kinds of posts to a forum, which stimulate productive dance. One would be, those initial posts wherein a thought provoking question or idea is posed that leads to much fruitful [a5]discussion and sharing of opinions. The second would be the posts giving comments, sharing opinions, and questioning of the questions, that follow such initial posts. If these "lead steps" and "follow up steps" are well mastered and orchestrated, we may be able to really dance up a storm.[a6]

Of course there are other valuable postings as well, such as; sharing information, real experiences, and asking for help in areas where understanding is lacking[a7].

Any comments on this posting would be more than welcome[a8], to sum up your final thoughts as well.[a9]

Thanks,

Jonathan [a1]Inclusive opening

[a2]Positions himself as part of both a group and the present group

[a3]Suggests an understanding of implications of this particular point for this particular group and this particular discussion

[a4]Not asking for permission to make a statement but is asserting his perceived right to do so. How has he reached the conclusion he has this right?

[a5]Not about sharing for sake of doing it but because it leads to other helpful discussion

[a6]Multiple kinds of messages are necessary for 'productive' interaction in this class

[a7]The class also needs these elements in order to be successful

[a8]Positioning himself as wanting dialogue with his fellow students

[a9]Positioning himself to assist his classmates

**Figure 5.6 – A message from Jonathan**

### **5.3.4 Message content analysis**

The content of discussion board messages contributed to this study in several, complex, ways. It had *informational* value in the sense that welcome messages gave information about students' backgrounds. It also provided student opinions, as expressed in the course of their studies as teachers studying at masters level in an online classroom. For example, one discussion board for each class concerned responses on the theme of the students expectations of how online discussion boards should work within this class context. This provided themes to compare and contrast with those generated from interview data where students were asked to talk about the activities they undertook in the online classroom.

Message content data also offered *situational* value in terms of demonstrating the ways in which 'conversations' are structured (intentionally or not); who are the active 'speakers'; what is said by the active speakers; what other voices authors call on, and to what use they put 'their' voices. The analytic techniques involved in using this content are considered further below.

It could be argued that at the time that the students were taking the class they were not aware that their words would be used for research and thus that any opinions they expressed would be unconstrained. They were nonetheless aware that as professional educators, in a class of professional educators, discussing how flexible learning should be organised and conducted within education institutions they would be expected to voice particular opinions. This might have had an impact on the views they expressed and the way they expressed them and thus, if they were to be interpreted as representing their personal beliefs, call in to question their validity for use in the study. However, since participants were speaking from a position of authority based on background and experience their comments could reasonably be expected to reflect that background, and to add considerable practitioner value to the study by illustrating the ongoing evolution of professional and disciplinary culture (see 2.6).

### 5.3.5 Using discourse analysis in message content analysis

The content of messages, in terms of the words used and the ideas expressed through them, provided material for analysis and contributed ideas and analytic categories for this study. However, while messages offered student explanations of phenomena (i.e. situations or behaviour) arising in the class, these were mainly descriptive and did not shed enough light on the properties and dimensions of those phenomena - that is to say, the conditions under which they arise, and their implications - for them to be especially helpful in building up responses to the research questions. In order to probe these phenomena more deeply I used another technique to supplement descriptions and explore further how words were used to do things in the class. The differences in the two approaches to analysing the content of discussion board messages can be illustrated by looking at two messages posted, one hour apart<sup>2</sup>, by **Eleanor**, a student in the Semester Three class. Neither of these messages was responded to by anybody.

<p><b>Subject:</b> I want people to USE it (((((-:</p>
<p>I don't like discussion boards that aren't used frequently. For example, I keep checking the reflection 1 bulletin for my group and find nothing posted from others on what they are thinking about fd, how they felt about certain readings, etc. Maybe this is what happens in "chat"???? I am not sure. In my experience discussion boards are for this purpose and I am feeling a lack of involvement here. I would love to hear from all of you on your perspectives,etc.</p>

Figure 5.7      Message One

<p><b>Subject:</b> I just want to add that...</p>
<p>I come from a working environment where I can bounce ideas off other people and I guess I am missing the "group thing" where I can do that.</p>

Figure 5.8      Message Two

My initial analysis of these messages (in the course of investigating message *purpose* – see 5.3.1 above) concentrated on the fact that neither was explicitly purposeful since they were not directly addressed to anyone in particular, although by implication Eleanor seemed to be addressing her classmates. The first message did offer a partial response to the task of the discussion board since the tutor had asked students to discuss what they wished to agree would be the 'rules of engagement' for their online discussions, and I coded the message purpose as *elaborate*. The second message I recorded as being both in the category of *self* and

<sup>2</sup> See also 7.3 for discussion on the nature of time in the online class.

*elaborate* since this message did not seem, in terms of the overall thread, to be of major significance.

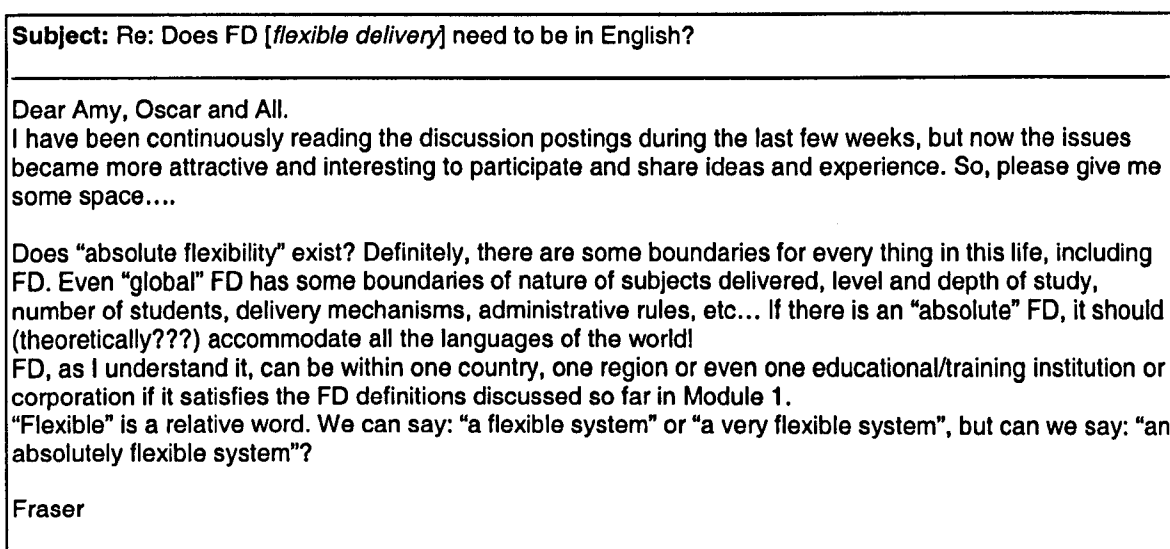
In the second analysis of these messages I accorded much greater importance to them since they illustrate that for Eleanor there is a conflict between what she sees as the purpose and practice of discussion forums and what she is actually experiencing when using them. In doing this analysis I had to be careful not to try and second-guess what authors were thinking but to pay attention to the words being used, and how they would be viewed and interpreted by other readers assuming that they were taken at face value.

The first message also draws attention to a situation in which a student has arrived online not knowing what is expected of them in terms of the norms of behaviour for a particular facility within the class – in this case “chat”. From this viewpoint, two other aspects of these messages are significant in cultural terms. These messages occur at the very end of the threads for this board and well after the group has reached a consensus that they will adopt messaging habits which are considerate of others. However, Eleanor ‘shouts’ - by using capital letters in the title of her first message title. There is also the ambiguous comment ‘I am feeling a lack of involvement here’. This suggests both that she does not feel part of the class because it is not behaving the way she expects, and that she feels her colleagues are not involved enough in the class because they are not posting to the discussion boards. This statement is, incidentally, also a good illustration of the difficulty of interpreting words at face value mentioned above, since it could be read as an implied criticism of her colleagues because they are not contributing in a way she feels appropriate. Finally, another conflict is visible in her second message when she uses an assumption based on a norm of behaviour in her face-to-face work environment in order to interpret behaviour in this classroom online.

For some messages, I used an analysis of discourse based on ideas from James Gee (see 2.4 above). From this perspective, the online classroom, as a context within the social world, is a space where many elements (e.g. people, places, things, ideas, beliefs, hopes, aspirations, etc.), come together as a context or ‘configuration’ (Gee, 2000 p.188) in which work is undertaken by and on behalf of those elements so as to position and organise them into

meaning. Interpretation of those elements within any particular configuration is done by means of 'enactive' and 'recognition' work (Gee, p.188). According to Gee, enactive work is our attempts to organise these elements and accord them value and meaning whilst recognition is the work done by others to agree or disagree, or to try to change our organisation of the elements. Elements only have meaning within a particular configuration or context and so what Gee calls our 'real' enactive work is 'in creating and sustaining the configurations' (p.189). These meanings then feed forward into our understandings of future configurations and present options for further negotiation.

The practice of this analytic approach (see Hewling, 2005a for full details) can be illustrated by looking at the message from another Semester Three student, **Fraser** (Figure 5.9 below). This message, to a discussion board dealing with the material presented for Module One in the course study materials, was the first contribution from Fraser (apart from his welcome board message). This board had been active for three weeks when the message, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of a total of 54 messages, was posted. Twelve contributors (i.e. half the registered student body) took part in discussions over the course of a total period of 7 weeks.



**Figure 5.9                      Message Three**

The first point of interest is that the message is clearly addressed. The salutation names the authors of the two immediately preceding messages and tacks 'All' onto the end. This pattern of greeting mirrors that used by many on this board. It serves to make a direct connection to both those who have already specified their views on the topic Fraser is about to write about, and to demonstrate his recognition that he and the others constitute part of a bigger entity which is the



class. Before Fraser embarks on the substantive content of his message he does some enactive work to establish his right to have a position in the ongoing discussion. He starts by establishing his credentials as a potential speaker. He states that he has been reading the previous postings, i.e. he is already 'in' the conversation despite having left no visible (text) mark to indicate this listening. He follows this by asking the group for 'some space'. This is a curious request which is hard to interpret without speculating, inappropriately, on his mental state, however it must be seen to indicate that for some reason or other he expects it to be meaningful to readers in this context. Having established his position, Fraser moves on to indirect enactive work in support of a possible theoretical position which he offers in terms of a question related to the ongoing discussion. The question is posed in the third person but he follows up with enactive work in support of how he personally understands the context. It is interesting that he makes a lot of use of rhetorical questions – his tutor has a very rhetorical style – and this further mirroring on Fraser's part has the effect of acknowledging and endorsing this rhetorical style as having authority in meaning making in this context, as well as (self) identifying and validating him as a speaking member of the group. Having validated his position Fraser then finishes his message with the initial question re-posed as a question for "we", the class - by implication a group of people equipped and able to determine the answer.

In terms of understanding the cultural processes at work in this classroom a couple of questions immediately come to mind looking at this message from Fraser. Firstly, if his words are taken at face value then what might lead him to assume that he might need to seek permission to speak in this class? As a registered member of the class, it may be imagined that there could be no reason for Fraser to question his right to "speak". Indeed, given that the discussion board has been set up by the institution and the tutors have previously posted messages encouraging students to use it, it can be said to be an expectation of the class that he will speak using this tool. Given that this is an online class, Fraser must have had the physical and technical means to access the online environment in order to enrol and, furthermore, the University has validated his entry by giving him a password and username. Notwithstanding all of this, the enactive work at the start of Fraser's message suggests that these assumptions are not necessarily obvious. Secondly, if he has a right to be in the conversation and to speak, why is he asking for 'space'? Being admitted to this online class accords him not just the right but the expectation that he will

take as much space as he needs to make whatever contribution he feels necessary but, again, this is not the impression given by the words he uses.

Thirdly, Fraser's request to be given some space is not the type of request seen to be made by any other students in this class. In relation to this, and although the message is likely to have been seen by other class members, no-one refers to Fraser's request in subsequent messaging whilst, on other occasions when students express, in their messages, some reservations about what they are posting, there will usually be messages of support posted in reply by others in the class. Perhaps, therefore, his fellow students did not read Fraser's message as a request for permission to speak. Instead, perhaps the message should be better understood as an attempt to take control of the conversation, to assert Fraser's authority to move the conversation in a new direction? His mirroring of the course team leader's style (by using rhetorical questions e.g. 'Does "absolute flexibility" exist?' and, 'We can say: "a flexible system" or "a very flexible system", but can we say: "an absolutely flexible system"?'') might be seen as enactive work to support this attempt. I have already noted elsewhere that conversations tended to be dominated by input from a small number of students – around half a dozen students - of whom, up until this point, Fraser was not one. It is possible to speculate on a number of interpretations for what was being done with words in this message. For the purposes of the analysis a definitive answer was not what was being sought; what was of more interest to me was that either interpretation suggested that issues of authority and control were implicated in how messages came to be composed and posted in this class.

### **5.3.6 Summarising the use of asynchronous discussion board messages**

Messages were used in a number of ways in this study. They were counted in respect of who posted them and their content was examined both in terms of the information they contained, and how what was said positioned and did 'work' for their authors and readers. I examined the contribution of messages to interaction in the class in terms of who sent and who responded to messages and how they were addressed. Message data were very versatile since they allowed information gathering (literal content and facts offered about themselves by the students); probing (to delve into the properties and dimensions of emerging categories and themes and to

see negotiation strategies in practice); and confirmation and triangulation (offering ideas for interview questions, offering numerical data of online activity, etc.).

## 5.4 Interviews

The data concerning which areas of the platform individual students used, as I have noted above, along with the questions and ideas arising from my initial examination of discussion board messages, raised all sorts of questions about exactly how students might be using the class facilities and whether they were using them in the way that the data implied they were. Patterns seemed to be emerging but there was no way of interrogating the data further. For example, it seemed there was differential use according to the students' proximity to the University, but there was no means of establishing why students logged into particular utilities (if, indeed their login was anything other than accidental) and what, if anything, they did when they were logged in there. Were there patterns of behaviour that might be indicative of anything other than individual learner preference, style or habit? The subject content of some messages was also interesting, as was who the messages were, or were not, addressed to – how did students' expect interaction to evolve? In order to pursue these questions it was necessary for me to speak directly to students.

Whilst it might have been possible to devise a pro-forma survey to seek further information direct from the students there were severe limitations to the outcomes such a survey would produce. It was clear that an enquiry technique was required which offered the option of completely open responses. This would permit discussion of issues and, potentially, in depth exploration of all the processes and influences at work. Open responses might possibly later be grouped into categories and themes but there was, at least initially, a need for openness. Given the geographic spread of the students, further investigation needed also to be non-location specific. I considered conducting interviews by email or using synchronous chat such as ICQ. However, whilst both those techniques, which I had used before (Hewling, 2002a), would keep the investigation within the context of the 'remote-access' virtual world, they would also have demanded a much greater time commitment from participants and from myself as interviewer and possibly, by their asynchronous nature, would have constrained rapport building and interaction. I did however use email on two occasions: firstly to undertake basic information

gathering and to organise interview times; secondly, to follow up and develop points of interest and clarification which came up in subsequent analysis.

#### 5.4.1 The strengths and weaknesses of using interviews

I determined that telephone interviews were the best available option for pursuing the research further. The particular advantages and disadvantages of the technique are summarised as follows.

FOR	AGAINST
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• allowed for a wide geographic spread of interviewees</li> <li>• could be scheduled to allow for geographically determined time differences</li> <li>• permitted 'real time', synchronous interaction</li> <li>• permitted open as well as closed responses and probing of particular points of interest</li> <li>• could be easily recorded for future study and review</li> <li>• did not require sophisticated equipment on the part of interviewees</li> <li>• afforded greater possibility for development of rapport and thus for deeper responses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of face-to-face interaction or visuals and, therefore, no accessibility for either party to 'paralinguistic' and body language cues</li> <li>• disadvantaged any student who was not comfortable with using a telephone</li> <li>• used a medium to which students were not accustomed in their role as online learners</li> <li>• was subject to the vagaries of technology, possible mechanical failure, etc.</li> </ul>

**Figure 5.10** Evaluation of Interview method

Fielding (1993) reports that the use of interviews 'has a strong claim to being the most widely used method of research' He offers a continuum of interview types:

- standardised or structured
- semi-standardised
- non-standardised, also known as unstructured or focused.

The first two are generally assessed by the application of quantification tools in order to produce descriptive statistics and are most appropriate where the researcher has 'some idea of what is happening with...(the) sample in relation to the research topic' (p.136). In studies where 'new

ground' is being explored, Fielding counsels 'a more flexible approach is best' (p.137). In the present study some preliminary indicators for the investigation had developed in the course of analysis of discussion boards and descriptive platform generated statistical data and thus I chose a 'mid-way' approach to interviews. In practical terms, this involved generating a framework of themes and possible associated questions, as a guide to discussion. This would ensure that no major areas of interest (in terms of outcomes of data previously analysed) would be missed. As interview data was collected and analytic themes recurred and categories became 'saturated' such a fixed structure would no longer be necessary, and, indeed, in later phases of interviewing my questions placed greater emphasis on some areas rather than others according to specific issues raised in earlier stages of analysis. This approach would then more closely resemble Fielding's third category, i.e. 'unstructured or focused'. Here he explains: 'interviewers simply have a list of topics they want the respondent to talk about' (p.136). There is no pre-determined set of questions or fixed order for asking them and the interviewer is free 'even to join in the conversation by discussing what they think of the topic themselves' (p.136).

The advantage of this approach is that it may raise topics and ideas previously not considered or may facilitate connections (either at the time of interview or later on during analysis), between what were previously apparently unrelated themes. The disadvantages of this approach stem chiefly from perceived issues of interviewer reactivity and reflexivity (Fielding, op.cit.), as was discussed in Chapter Four (see 4.2.4). Triangulation of methods is proposed by Fielding (op.cit.) as desirable to confirm findings and avoid the outcomes of analysis of such data being seen as unreliable or biased. In this case I was able to achieve this triangulation by using message and login data from the delivery platform.

According to Hammersley (2003), critics of interview studies advocate 'severe methodological caution in approaching interview data' (p.122) for a number of reasons including questions about whether subjects will tell the truth but also whether what they say can be taken as what they actually think; indeed, whether what they say they think is the 'truth' can ever be representative of *any* kind of objective truth, since all accounts are only one of an infinite number of possible versions produced according to what the account is perceived to be supposed to be doing. This means therefore that care must be exercised in interpreting

interview data (p.125). Points of concern in this study are raised as and when appropriate in the reporting of interview analysis in subsequent chapters.

#### 5.4.2 Creating and testing out the interview schedule

The questions for the interview schedule were intended both to build on themes and issues arising from the platform data analysis, and to elaborate on themes appearing from analysis to date. For example, I wanted to explore why, according to the login data I had looked at, certain platform areas were used more than others by different students.

The interview schedule was developed using five broad areas:

- **About you** - questions to elicit information about how students categorise themselves and how they visualise themselves and present that visualisation to others
- **Background** - the students' learning 'roots'; their educational background; their prior learning experience - an attempt to highlight areas of potential 'difference' not immediately apparent from the analysis of the usage and message data
- **Attitudes** – students' attitudes to their present learning options, choices and experiences
- **Platform behaviour** - students' own analysis of behaviours and preferences about which data existed from the early analysis
- **Interaction** – examining how students view interaction; the need for it; the existence of it; the practice of it. This section sub-divided into three classes of interaction:
  - **Content** - expectations and experiences of interaction with the (principally) textual subject matter content
  - **Tutors** - expectations and experiences of interaction with tutors and facilitators; the nature and perceived 'value' and status of such interaction
  - **Students** - expectations and experiences of interaction with fellow students; the nature of it, both via and off the platform, and its relationship to students' overall learning.

Whilst the schedule (see Appendix Three) followed the sequence detailed above this was not 'cast in stone' but was devised more as a checklist in order that no key area be missed in the course of any one interview, I recognised that, depending on the interviewee, the questioning and topics discussed might more naturally follow a different sequence in practice. The schedule

was also flexible enough to be adapted as interview succeeded interview and new ideas from ongoing analysis were integrated. All questions were designed to be asked in as open a manner as possible but the exact wording and ordering was not pre-determined in order to allow natural development of the conversation and development of rapport. Answers to some questions were such that they could, potentially, be quantitatively analysed (and results possibly compared to similar data collected from the platform itself, e.g. preference for one platform area or another). Other questions sought ideas and feelings and were intended for qualitative, thematic and content analysis (e.g. what part did your fellow students play in your overall learning outcomes?). At the end of the scheduled questions I asked participants if they could be contacted for follow-up by email as analysis and interpretation developed.

I piloted the draft interview schedule with two former students of an Open University programme not dissimilar to the Australian programme in my study. Use of students from a different programme ensured that a rigorous examination of the schedule could be made without running the risk of testing an untried tool on students from whom 'real' data could otherwise be collected. Neither student was previously known to me. Obviously, no platform data based on the results of previous analysis of discussion board messages was available for either interviewee, but the format of the interview schedule was still appropriate since it delineated areas potentially of interest to any researcher looking at student online behaviour.

The interviews were conducted by telephone. A ReTell telephone voice recorder recorded the dialogue. I transcribed each of the pilot interviews immediately (within 24 hours) of the conversation having taken place in order to maximise accuracy and make best use of my recall of, and reflection on, the event. I also made written notes. These notes concerned issues arising with the design of the schedule, of the questions used and the kinds of themes that participants raised as responses to my questions. Regarding transcription, I transcribed the first pilot with full inclusion of pauses and incidental utterances (e.g. 'right', 'OK', 'I see', etc.) although it was quickly clear that, for the purposes of my analysis, such detail was of no real material use. Thus from the second pilot onwards I noted only significant utterances. Thirty to sixty minutes of recorded interview time took between 5 and 8 hours to transcribe and resulted in 3000 to 7000 words of raw text which took around 1 to 2 hours to proof and finish.

Both pilot interviews elicited data which was useful and productive and I felt this indicated the suitability of the schedule for the intended future interviews. However, it became apparent to me as I began analysing the first non-pilot interviews, that changes to the emphasis in some of the questions could elicit even more information, e.g. by asking interviewees how they felt about something or how *they* had experienced a particular situation - (How do you think that others saw you? Why might that be? How would they get that impression?) - although, this also required more time from me in building rapport at the start of the interview. It also required me to be more proactive in creating a two-way dialogue by contributing supportive comments or anecdotes to the interaction. This meant I ran the risk of possibly influencing the direction of responses from interviewees but this danger was, I felt, outweighed by the benefits of producing deeper, less 'rehearsed', responses from interviewees. I did however note in my research diary certain points where I felt this happened, as a marker that I would need to pay attention to this potential 'interference' during subsequent analysis and interpretation of interview data. (See also discussion at 4.2.4 above on researcher reactivity).

Whilst the content of the pilot interviews was not key to the purpose of those interviews, their content did nonetheless raise ideas and themes which I could take forward into the main interviews and, thematically, include in the analysis and interpretation of the data for the whole study.

I subjected the pilot interviews to a less rigorous analysis than those which followed later since the purpose of the pilots was principally to test the interview schedule. The analysis that was done was thematic and done manually, using coloured highlighting techniques and numbering of themes, on hard copies of the interview transcripts. I thought it likely that this technique would remain appropriate for the main study interviews since I found it easier to be able to see larger amounts of text in front of me in paper form than would be possible by use of a computerised analysis package such as N6. I wanted to be able, potentially, to spread details of all the analytic codes I was using out in front of me – this would not be possible using an electronic analysis package.



Apart from indicating the overall usefulness of the interview schedule, the pilots for the interviews raised my awareness of the complexities of interviewing non-native speakers of English. The following points contributed to my later decision to limit interviews (though not message analysis) to native speakers of various varieties of English:

- The limited variety of social and non-verbal cues available on the telephone. Whilst this may have parallels with the online environment there is an added disadvantage on the telephone because the discussion is taking place in real-time and there is limited scope for the speakers to reflect on their words before speaking or responding. They also have no opportunity to check out understandings, e.g. by use of a dictionary - an option which is available in an asynchronous text-based online environment.
- Explanation and clarification are possible but these may slow the conversation excessively or cause the discussion to lose focus or direction; important points may be lost in the process. Some thoughts may not be spoken because the complexities of rendering them in English are regarded by the potential speaker as simply too difficult to contemplate.
- Whilst there may be stylistic differences between speakers of different variants of English these tend to be less marked than those between speakers using English as a lingua franca.
- Likewise, where English is a 'common' language, interpretation of specific words may be necessary on the part of both speakers but does not have to pass through translation in and out of another language.
- Questions about issues of language competence may give rise to doubts about whether or not a question has 'really' been understood and this may distort interpretation.

I conducted a total of 15 interviews with students and one with a member of the induction team at the University. All of the interviewees were self-selected in the sense that they volunteered. More than 15 volunteered overall, those chosen were the first to volunteer by gender, that is to say the first seven men were interviewed as were the first seven women although there was a gender imbalance in that none of the men had been online tutors whilst two of the women had been. An eighth woman was interviewed face-to-face because, co-incidentally, she came to visit the Open University at the time I was interviewing students, she also constituted the third student who had also previously been an online tutor. This was especially lucky as I was more

easily able to engage her in discussion of my emerging conclusions. Interviewees were all native speakers of variants of English. This latter point was not intentional but fortuitous. I had interviewed one non-native speaker of English when doing the pilot interviews and had quickly realised that complications arose in analysis because it was difficult at times to establish whether it was culture or linguistic competence which was implicated in responses. I concluded that interviews with native speakers would be of most use to me for this study. There was no doubt that culture was implicated in the online experience of all the students but in the case of non-native speakers what might appear to be culture-related issues might in fact be related, first and foremost, to students' linguistic competence. One non-native speaker did originally volunteer to participate and for his platform data and messages to be used but I was unable to interview him because of constraints at his workplace – an oil-field in Saudi Arabia. By interviewing only native speakers I was able to remove a potential intervening factor. I interviewed students from England, America, Australia, Canada, Scotland and New Zealand.

#### **5.4.3 Study-specific Interview difficulties**

In the context of this particular study I addressed the need for 'cautions', as Hammersley (2003) identifies them (see 5.4.1 above) by triangulation of methods:

- by using interview data as only one of several sources informing the study, and
- through the questioning techniques used within the interviews.

Prior to the interviews I had made extensive use of platform-generated data. Throughout analysis and interviewing, the discussion board messages and the course area usage (login) statistics were available for me to cross-reference interviewee responses. This informed analysis of interview transcripts and developed my understanding of the properties and dimensions of different themes and categories. For example, when I was questioning interviewees about how they had used course content materials, how often they had used them and the time they spent on them, it was possible for me to cross reference to details of how often they had logged on to the platform. Whilst logins could not account for all the time spent on content materials (as it would be 'normal' for most students to download at least some of this material and use it off line), cross referencing to the statistics for logins for the individual student did enable me to pinpoint areas where there seemed to be a discrepancy between the two data sources. I could then try to establish in interview why such differences had appeared and

whether they were significant in the context of this study. I detail an example of this technique in practice at 5.5 below.

During the interviews themselves I made efforts to 'take apart' responses in order to see the influences which had led to those responses. For example, the schedule for the interviews included a question about whether the class was international. I followed this by asking probing questions, looking for details of how the student had come to the conclusion they were offering as a response to that initial question: e.g. how did you know that students were not Australian? Was there anything in what students wrote which made you think they were not Australian? Can you think of an example of this? Using this technique made it easier to see and test out how interviewees had reached, or were practising, the positions they took on issues under discussion.

On occasions I also used outcomes from my analysis of other data as a tool to query a response a student was giving me during interview. For example, when discussing how interactive the class had been, I asked one interviewee who had rated it highly to comment on a statistic from the usage data - that, in fact, only six of a possible 24 students had actually posted to the particular board being discussed. This technique of active comparison became a way of facilitating further thought about just how reasonable and valid impressions of interaction in the class might be and how they could accurately be recorded.

This technique offered the further benefit of being able to absorb some of the difficulties which might arise when, as in this case, I was asking interviewees to talk about events which were no longer very recent. In some cases, as much as 9-10 months had passed between the class in question and the date of the interview, and hindsight was potentially an issue in determining the value of students' responses. In this respect, challenging an interviewee to explain how their assumptions and positions had been reached helped reveal incidents where events happening, or knowledge acquired, in the period between the class and the interviews might have changed the interviewee's perspective on what 'really' happened. On several occasions in the first batch of interviews, students commented to the effect that 'if I had known then what I know now...'. This does not negate the value of the interviewee's comments but, conversely, may actually

enhance the value of the contribution since it may shed light on how processes of learning and understanding are occurring during the practice of being an online student.

#### **5.4.4 Analysis of Interview data**

I coded transcripts by hand. My efforts to use qualitative analysis software (N6) had proved frustrating because firstly they did not allow large amounts of text to be viewed at any one time, for comparison, and, secondly, reports were produced in a format which I simply did not find useful. On occasions I used the comment facility in Word on electronic copies of sections of interviews. This was especially useful when I collected thematically-related sections of several interviews and pasted them into a single document for comparative evaluation. An example of three interview extracts relating to a thematic category 'who's what?' is shown as Figure 5.11 below.

Once the interview data were coded, coding categories were recorded on code sheets which were broadly thematic. Initially codes were collected under the headings aligned with those I had used for the interview question schedule (see Appendix Three), e.g. background, expectations, platform behaviour, etc., but as new themes, in terms of core categories, emerged the lists were adjusted to reflect progress in analysis. Often categories were encouraged to emerge by taking all the codes/ideas from one list, copying them onto individual pieces of paper, shuffling the papers and re-ordering coding. This was best achieved by spreading them all over the floor and doing a kind of physical brainstorming.

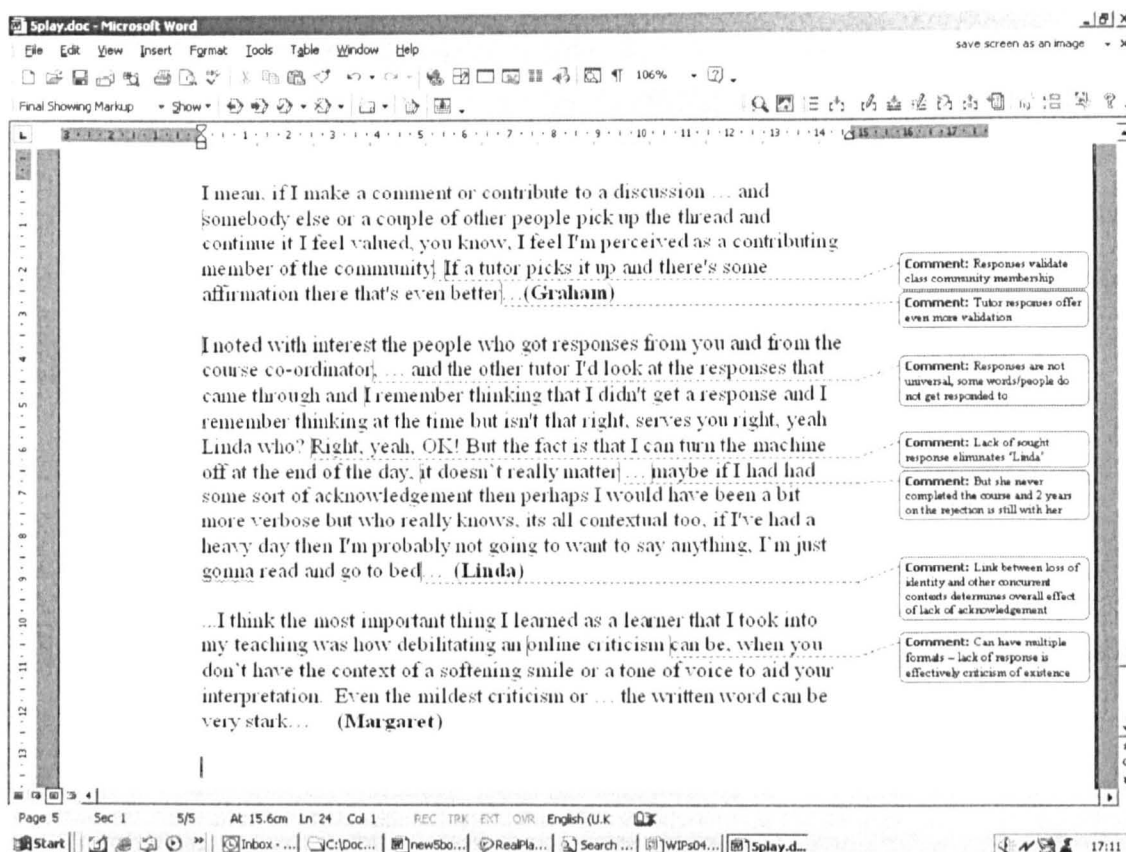


Figure 5.11 Interview analysis using Word comment facility

## 5.5 Relating different data to each other and to overall outcomes

The flexibility of the grounded theorising-inspired methodology which underpinned this study allowed for multiple sources of data to be included. Often this helped to confirm ideas emerging from across data sources, and explore the properties and dimensions of phenomena identified over time. On some occasions, however, this triangulation process led to conflicting outcomes. This conflict, in turn, led to further exploration of the data or caused me to ask further questions. Often, 'conflict' was indicative of possible reactivity at work (see 4.2.4 & 4.2.5). Comparing the analysis of one student's discussion board contributions with what he said, in interview, about the purpose of these messages illustrates some of the difficulties involved. In interview the student stated that his main use for discussion boards was to post messages there asking for help from others in understanding specific parts of the course materials. He reported that he found that these requests, if couched generally enough, would give him a range of responses to help him. There is, however, little evidence in the message records of him actually doing this – at least in terms of numbers of messages posted or their literal subject content. How then can the conflict be resolved; should one set of data have analytic precedence over the other? For

the purposes of this study the issue was not so much deciding the 'truth' or otherwise of either account, rather, the important point was to identify that there might be conflict, for a student, in understanding and using the discussion boards, or that their understanding of the use of these might change over time. Neither set of data offered a whole truth. The platform records of messages posted showed only what the platform, configured in a certain way – which was not designed to investigate the questions that analysis was seeking to ask of it – was able to collect. The interview was an interpretation on the part of the student, post-hoc, of what he thought he had been doing. It was tempered both by the knowledge that he was being questioned by a researcher who had also been 'present' in the class, and by what he understood he should have been doing or what he thought I wanted to hear. In determining an outcome for the cross analysis of the two items, the interview and the message analysis, what was of interest was that a student might have a different view of what they thought they were doing compared to what the platform might be interpreted, by me, as suggesting the student was doing, or, indeed, what a tutor might be expecting the student to do. I later linked this idea to analysis of what other students and tutors reported as the purpose of posting messages and was able to develop a collage of thematically interconnected ideas. I also cross-referenced the idea to interview data from one of the tutors who stated that she felt that the advantage of online learning was that she no longer just saw the 'product' of learning but, instead, saw the 'process' of learning at work through the messaging of the students. Together these ideas helped me to develop the profile of a number of different analytic categories.

## **5.6 Other ad hoc sources of data and analytic enlightenment**

At various points in this study I used a number of other sources of data, often on a one off basis - e.g. clarification 'factual' data was collected from a number of individuals - especially when questions arose over procedural details in accounts given by students or tutors in the course of interviews. Institutional materials provided new perspectives on procedures or processes raised as topics in interviews; for example, some open access data from the University's website was used to confirm impressions offered by students of the numbers and origins of international students studying online. I had used similar material in a previous study (Hewling, 2002a), and it had provided a perspective on what are presented to students as this institution's norms and reference points for being an online student. Also, case studies of online classes were used not

only in the review of literature in Chapters 1-3, but were helpful sources during analysis - providing comparisons and contrasts and confirming or refuting patterns which seemed to be appearing in data.

In terms of analysis, concepts and principles from discourse analysis were used in examining interviews and messages. These were all subjected to 'unpacking' using ideas similar to those discussed above (see 5.3.5 above) for message data. This is not inconsistent with the grounded theorising methodology; rather, use of such techniques demonstrates how flexible the methodology can be.

## **5.7 Chapter summary**

In this chapter I have considered the sources of data for this study – platform-recorded report data, asynchronous discussion board messages and interview transcripts. In particular, I have discussed how these data were collected, how they were used to inform analysis and how their respective uses and limitations drove me to further data collection. I have indicated that platform-recorded report data were especially useful for generating lines of enquiry whilst message data contributed both manifestations of culture at work in the interaction within the online classroom, and themes for me to explore in interviews with students. Interview data offered the students' versions of activity online and contributed to interpretations of themes which I had found whilst examining other data sources. I also discussed the interconnectedness of different data sources and I sought to resolve the occasional analytic conflicts this created.





## Chapter Six

### The practice of negotiation online

#### 6.0 Introduction

In Chapter One I looked at the particular characteristics of the elements that make up VLEs. In Chapter Two I considered how culture might be understood beyond equating it solely with the national or ethnic backgrounds brought online by students. I established a theoretical orientation to the concept which views it not as the fixed ideas of a particular group of people but as something which is experienced as it is constructed in a context or situation by means of ongoing negotiation and interaction. I discussed professional, disciplinary and institutional contexts for this 'doing' of culture - activity which might be particularly relevant to examining culture in the online classes in this study. In Chapter Three I reviewed the ways in which VLEs have been researched to date and established the particular characteristics of the elements of the VLE which make it a configuration of communicative activity. I proposed a revised set of research questions which would focus my investigation into how this communicative activity comes to function as cultural negotiation and construction, such that it begins to shape the expectations and activity of participants. In this chapter I look in more depth at how this seems to happen as the class evolves over time.

#### 6.1 Resources for understanding online learning

The participants in the classes in this study are all education professionals although some have come to the profession from other fields including nursing, the church and business. Their expectations of online learning, as they discuss them in interview with me, imply that their understanding of the nature of online learning draws on influences from multiple cultural configurations. Also, that at different times before, during and after the course different sources took precedence in how they claimed to understand their experience online. In the discussion that follows, data extracts from messages posted to discussion boards are presented in text boxes exactly as originally posted (complete with errors of spelling and grammar); extracts from transcripts of interviews are unboxed. In both cases authors are identified by means of pseudonyms.

### 6.1.1 Comparisons with f2f and distance education experiences

When planning to take a course online some students made direct comparisons between the kinds of education they had previously experienced and what they were seeking online:

I think I found the whole idea quite exciting and part of that was not really knowing what I was getting myself into. Probably had some nebulous ideas about it being more cutting edge than paper-based, and more responsive but that's sort of on the basis of having made a couple of futile attempts at paper-based – it couldn't get much worse. (Margaret)

Simon also had hopes of something better than his previous paper-based experience,

*Have you done distance learning before?*

Yes, the graduate certificate of TESOL that I did, that was distance format and I did that in Korea between Korea and Australia but that was print-based material which was sent to Korea and I had to mail back the assignments to Australia - there was no real e-mailing although I did eventually complain and get the lecturers to start doing that, which they sort of did but it was a bit of a disaster the whole course.

*But you weren't put off when you came to register for the masters...?*

No, because I had a feeling, I thought in my own mind that it must be different and hopefully much better - than the distance model that I had experienced with the TESOL certificate ... I was expecting it to be a bit more multimedia based. (Simon)

Amy *had* done it before: 'I was impressed, it was good.' (Amy), and wanted to do it again.

Karli, on the other hand, used the experience of a colleague to determine what she did *not* want:

I also looked at other distance ed. programmes, [name] - a colleague, is completing a qualification down there and was very happy with it but the mix of subjects wasn't quite what I was looking for so, also it wasn't quite as varied, I was more focused on the online delivery so at [institution name] it was both the convenience of it being a distance ed. programme and also having a good range of subject areas to choose from. (Karli)

For Graham, the reputation of the institution, in terms of prior professional and personal contact, also played a part:

the other opening for me was that I have had a number of friends at [institution name] for a long time in faculty and staff there and [name] was, was very generous with his time for me, [name] used to be the head of the DE centre, as you probably know and he ... when our college began to move into a better delivery of its programmes I spent some time with [name] and he was very helpful, that was, at that stage we were looking simply at DE

which was a new thing for us and have been very taken with the trend towards flexible adult to adult learning competence based because that's what we do. (Graham)

He further reported that one of his motivations for learning online was that, as an educator, he wanted to understand what might be a new way of learning/teaching which he could use in his work with theology students,

... the curiosity of wanting to discover what this thing is, you know, one hears about the trends in education and it seemed to me that this could be the way that it was going. (Graham)

### 6.1.2 Ideas of flexibility

One of Janet's motivations for choosing to learn in this class was an understanding of online learning as flexible and suited to her needs since it would allow her entry at a level not possible in her native Canada<sup>1</sup>:

Jane was very interested in online education 'coz that was her major and I wanted, we wanted to be utilising the same university and we wanted something that would be recognised throughout. I guess I was a little bit more concerned that I wasn't going to get accepted into a Canadian university because a lot of them still don't give that kind of flexibility, it is changing and ever so much but at the time that we started we really didn't see that. (Janet)

An understanding of online education as a flexible process occurs for others too and, for Catherine, was combined with a professional understanding that to improve her skill as an online designer and teacher she must also experience the phenomenon of learning online:

I didn't have time to go to face-to-face classes and I wanted the experience of learning online because I was jolly well teaching online and developing for teaching online but I didn't know what it felt like and I felt that that was an important part of the process. ... nothing to do with expertise and everything to do with economics and time. (Catherine)

Flexible also meant convenient for some students:

The convenience of being able to study from here, from home, I work from home, my office is in our home so I can combine work with study and the course was, is, part of my work anyway, it's sponsored by my employer therefore quite compatible to be doing both at the same computer. (Graham)

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<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that Janet makes a specific reference to her country of origin thus demonstrating how knowledge of a particular national context is implicated in her own personal negotiation of professional culture – as an informing rather than a determining tool. She used her national knowledge to inform her professional evaluation of what might be suitable for her as a learner with weak formal qualifications rather than determining her choice of university according to whether or not it was Canadian – it didn't determine her decision but it did inform it.

It's more flexible, it's much more suitable for me, time constraints, and actually finding a decent course because here [*in the Gulf*] we have organisations jumping up right left and centre but I don't trust them. (Amy)

Flexibility within education as an ideal is also supported by the institutional culture of the University:

We say that you can study anywhere at any time and how you want to. So the ethos is that if your circumstances change and you no longer can work on campus then you can move into the distance mode and for another part of your course it could be online. There is that concept that every level or means of studying is going to be available to you wherever you are and whatever your circumstances happen to be. The mixed mode. So that ultimately a person could do their whole course online or they could do it by distance in a mixture and if they wanted to come on campus then they have that flexibility. ( Ailcia - induction course staff member)

The university, on its website, makes a direct association between the learning they offer (flexibly) and enhancing career prospects. For Richard, Bart and Michael this will enable a complete change of direction as a result of learning,

**Subject:** Re: Hello to all

Hey Bart

My name is Michael and I am the same as you, studying to be a Manual Arts teacher but I am a cabinetmaker by trade. Talk to you later.

Michael.

I've seen a lot of older people that left school, I sort of make friends with the older guys in the workshops or whatever, some of them that left school in grade 8 and grade 9, they are 65 years and still working on the tools 'coz they didn't go back to school so, I look at these people and think, there's gotta be more to life than this, I'm forcing myself to go back and study. (Richard)

It is quite easy to see how the idea of flexibility and convenience may have manifested itself in practice for students like Janet who was in Japan and Amy who was in the Middle East, since the online class permitted them to cross boundaries of time and space and 'attend' classes at an Australian University without having to physically relocate. For Richard, Bart and Michael, who all lived quite close to the university and because of that proximity might be assumed not to need to go online, it is less clear. Catherine, who was also 'local' offers an explanation of this phenomenon:

our experience in Australia at the moment is we have a specific group of learners and they are probably the majority of our learners who are not coming out of school and moving through uni. They're already professionals, they may be doctors, they may be lawyers, they

may be dentists or orthodontists and they are sick of the pressures of their own profession, they don't want to let go of that profession until they have another one to go to. They don't have time to go to face-to-face classes, so they're looking for what I was looking for: not to have to go to the university that may be five minutes drive away, but to be able to study in their office, at home, in their own time as they like and when they like.

*3am in the morning or whatever...*

Yes, that's right. That's not really distance learning. It's flexible learning and this is where I started to get angsty and say well they are treating this like it's all distance learning but it's not. It's flexibility in what I learn, when I learn it, how I learn it. (Catherine)

For these students, and Richard is a good example of this from among those interviewed in this study, convenience and flexibility is as much about online learning allowing them to run two lives in parallel as about crossing physical distance or about the nature of the learning itself. Indeed, part of their cultural context for 'doing learning' is that it is something which creates opportunities for them as individuals. This is reinforced by the association of flexibility and career enhancement offered by the university, and exemplified by their website which encourages would-be students to view learning in this way. The university's paradigm of education is one that is changing from f2f or paper-based distance to online - in response to social change such as moves in employment practice from indefinite to fixed term contracts, from an idea of a job for life towards a series of jobs over a lifetime.

### **6.1.3 Summarising Initial Influences on the negotiation of culture**

All the participants in this study used understandings of how education is done, could or should be done, in the course of deciding to learn online. Arguably some of these understandings may have their roots simply in these people having had prior experience of being a learner, rather than any particularly special understanding arising from being educational professionals. However, it is also apparent that the participants go beyond that level of understanding too, and it may prompt them to further activity. For example, when Catherine says she needed to feel what it is like to be in the position that her students are in, she positions herself as a professional educator exercising judgement on a matter of appropriate professional practice; actually doing a course in order to see how it feels to be a student under those circumstances takes her beyond simply thinking about the situation as a professional.

As they make the decision to study online, and as they begin to do so, participants use their professional knowledge as a means to compare, contrast and categorise the new online teaching/learning context in relation to what they already know of such contexts. There may be no visible negotiation at this stage, in the sense that there is no discussion with others in the class, but the process of understanding the culture of the online classroom is beginning nonetheless as they are negotiating new meanings for the doing of education within their own personal and professional frames of reference. There is also negotiation between participants' understandings of education and other cultural frames of reference, in particular but not exclusively, those of the institution (e.g. the interpretation of 'flexibility'). The university in its own turn, by actively seeking professionals wishing to re-skill whilst still in employment and by offering them flexibility, is responding to (i.e. negotiating) cultural change in the market it serves and, co-incidentally, helping to enact that change.

## **6.2 Getting to grips with the online class**

In order to enter the University system, subscribe to a particular qualification programme route (in this case either Honours or Masters in Education) and obtain accreditation for courses studied, students need to submit application forms by post and receive confirmation back. Once this is complete all future communication with the University takes place via electronic means. This includes the selection of course options, payment of fees and all assessment activity.

### **6.2.1 The technology bump**

Catherine, having been an online tutor before becoming an online learner, identified what she called the 'technology bump' - i.e. mastering the technology used for the course - as an important stage in this process of getting into the online learner world. Her sentiments were echoed by others who found that manipulating technology was a surprising, physical, hurdle towards progress:

when I was doing it I was working out in the country, we were having trouble with the phone lines and all the rest of it but my biggest fear, more than expectation was that I wouldn't be able to get online regularly enough to proceed but that was more of a hardware problem, than the schooling problem ... there were times when we didn't have the phone for like 10 days in a row probably, 'coz we were on a property which sort of, well that might have been an expectation I suppose, that I needed to be there, that I needed and preferred to check in every couple of days just to make sure everything was ticking along. (Richard)

The first point of entry to the class comes as the students reach the peak of the 'technology bump' and, armed with a student number and password, are able to access the online course environment. In theory this should happen on the same day for all students, a pre-arranged date published and distributed to all students by the university. In practice, entry dates can range over a period of a month or longer. The university, despite advertising fixed semester dates, makes a point of allowing registration for up to four weeks after the start date as part of their policy, as noted above, to make entry and study as flexible and student-centred as possible. Some of the more experienced students discovered that the course pages may actually 'go live', i.e. become accessible to registered students, some days before the official start date:

Then you, what I would do, is wait for the course and then look for when it's actually going to start. Then I would actually find out if there's any material that's coming out before the class starts so I could download material early so I could kind of get reading soon so I wouldn't get behind and then, when the course starts, you sign on and begin to read the material from the teacher and the first lessons. (**Oscar**)

The effect of permitting differential entry dates, and thus different entry points, to the same course is discussed further below, but at this stage it is worth noting that the view of the way forward for each individual student may differ quite significantly according to the stage of the semester at which the student arrives. All will share the experience of a first gaze at the landscape ahead but it will look somewhat different four weeks into the course calendar than it does on the official access date. This is not so much to do with time passing as such, but more to do with the nature of the environment where any class or individual activity leaves visible marks in the form of messages. For example, the students arriving online in the first couple of days may see only a few messages on the discussion boards but when Eleanor arrived online in her class two weeks after the official start date there were immediately over 100 messages for her to view. The university's work in making access easier and more flexible enables more learners to get online within their own time frame but has the knock-on effect of providing them with a qualitatively different picture of the learning environment ahead according to their time of arrival online. Flexibility, in practice, brings students into contact with a new element in the configuration which is the online class – the delivery platform.

### **6.2.2 Once inside the class**

Logging on to the course website students find a 'front page' with a number of buttons linking to the various parts of the online resources at their disposal as participants in the class. The front page also contains all the official messages from the course tutor team and, once the class is allocated to tutor groups in the first week, there are also direct hyperlinks from the front page to the different group areas. All students can access all study materials and student tools (e.g. links to library, technical support, etc.) but access to tutor group discussion boards is only open to tutors and members of any particular group. With the exception of details of the procedures for access to these group areas (sent by email to all students individually), students will normally only know which areas of the class they can access by trying to access them, i.e. by clicking on link buttons and seeing if they work. The platform offers signposts but no guide to the norms and assumptions which control those markers. Finding the extent and boundaries of working within the online class becomes a matter of trial and error - discovering limits by hitting them, clicking icons and links and seeing what happens.

A design assumption that students will explore the whole of the class space on arrival online is built in to the delivery platform design but this is not explicitly stated anywhere on screen or in student materials. There were several occasions when students seemed not to have undertaken this exploration and were unaware of the expectation that they would do so. For example, often students would not realise that in order for their assignments to be graded and officially recorded these must be sent to their tutor via the electronic dropbox accessed via the student tools menu, and when told to use the dropbox were unable to upload files correctly. Later, students would email tutors to ask about their assignment grades having not realised that the dropbox was a two-way function which tutors also used for returning marked work. In other words, students did not easily understand how important they were in this environment; it really is learner-centred in the sense that movement forward through the learning on offer is dependent on them being active and inquisitive.

Most critically, a student who ignored, or failed to keep checking, the discussion areas of the class would fail to receive vital information about how the class was operating or advice on solving any current technical issues. The platform design assumes that the front page links offer all the signposts required for navigation through the course despite many of the critical signposts for the



class being, in fact, located within the exchanges of messages within the different discussion boards. On some occasions important points from class discussions were converted into messages on the front page (e.g. a message from the course team about assignment dates) but this was rare. Tutors appeared, from the way in which they used discussion boards, to hold an assumption of their own that all students would read all discussion board postings. This was an assumption that led to a degree of confusion for students since the tutor-stated policy on discussion board participation was that although students' participation on those boards was desirable, it was not actually essential. This situation also implies that far from the platform exhibiting design norms which were understood by tutors and students those of its designers were quite different from those of its users. The platform itself becomes an active element in the negotiation of class culture because it embodies the cultural understandings of its designers, one of the most problematic of which is that classroom metaphors from f2f education are suitable for flexible online learning and teaching.

In students' talk about online class practice, in interviews, it was clear there was also a difference in understanding between tutors and students over the value of messages in the online class. For tutors, messages were interaction and discussion which would enhance the learners' experience. For students, messages were interesting when they offered answers to their questions, or details of how others tackled common problems. But, equally often, messages were a 'noise' problem, interference rather than help. It often took students a while to reconcile these different perspectives. Richard provides a good example of how his understanding develops over time as he negotiates his own evolving view of the class culture:

I remember Brian [team leader] at the beginning, reading his messages, there were sometimes four or five messages in a day hitting the site and I remember at the beginning reading them and thinking this is a waste of time why am I reading these? And then by the end of the course I sort of stood back and thought, well, [...] he was keeping us updated as best he could [...] he would tell us as soon as he found out kind of thing, I think that was important, keeping people up to date, keeping people, keeping communication open, you know, there was always one that if you had a problem contact me and it was a direct link, click the button basically and you were in my office, I think that was important [...] we have a regional liaison officer up here, a woman, she bombs us with emails, you know, every second day, do you want this, do you want that, do you want the other and in the end I just had to write back and say if I want anything, I'll contact you!

(Richard)

Within a discourse of flexibility the 'noise' of messages on class discussion boards may seem to be something that the student can freely choose to dismiss. But as students negotiate their way through their new learning context - the online class - and begin to send and receive messages and increase their experience of the consequences of doing so, the flexibility discourse evolves into something that looks markedly different to them from the way it did before they first came online.

The time at which a student arrives online, in terms of when they first log in to the course and relative to the 'official' start date of the course, is not the only thing which impinges on that student's view of the way ahead. In theory a student's first posted message marks both their viewpoint after having mastered the technology bump and after having made their visible entry to class (in terms of becoming 'visible' to others). But, in practice, as will be seen below, the two events may not coincide. Close examination of the login data for the class may show (the tutor) that the student has actually been in to class and observed it on one or more occasions before the visit on which that student posts their first message.

### 6.2.3 First words

Oscar's first gaze over the new landscape, as the first of his class to successfully scale the 'technology bump' and enter the classroom, is clear, in so far as it consists of only the course materials which all students have available online and one message located on a discussion board which is entitled 'Welcome Aboard'. The message is from the Course Team Leader, Brian. The message is the same one used on all offerings of this particular course during the year for which data was collected for this study.

**Subject:** Its great to meet you!

Hi I am Brian, your course leader and I welcome you on your first visit to the discussion board for course 4640. This is where most of the collaborative action takes place.

In the first instance I would take this opportunity to introduce the other members of the course teaching team. My partners are Anne from U.K/Botswana & Belinda all the way from Texas U.S.A. I am delighted that we could organise for Belinda and Anne to lend a hand here, as they are both experienced educators and bring significant experiences and insights to the course in terms of both alternate & traditional delivery systems. Both my partners have learnt and taught using electronic delivery systems and have sound appreciations of flexible pedagogies and in particular, addressing the needs of online learners. You can find out more about Anne and Belinda by visiting the staff information page in this corse.

For the initial stages of the course, we allow a period for introductions and getting familiar with the delivery platform. On your first visit to this site, if you could leave a brief introduction on yourself, it will assist us to get to know each other a little. Suggested scope of your introduction could be name, hometown, occupation/organisation, role at work if currently employed and any brief comments pertaining to your expectations of this unit. Looking forward to a great semesters learning.

Regards

Brian, Anne & Belinda<sup>2</sup>

Oscar's response was the first message to be posted to any discussion board for his class:

**Subject:** Hello from Oscar

Hello everyone. My name's Oscar. I'm from the American South, Arkansas. I've got relatives in Texas, too! I live in Japan, now, Uji city, near Kyoto, and teach English, Internet English, basic drawing and other subjects- all mainly at Jr college level and university. I've learned a lot, surely, about myself while teaching in Japan.

I'm looking forward to the course and already find it interesting due to all the history and theory of education that has led to 'Flexible delivery' concepts, as talked about in the readings. I'm very happy to be in the course. E-mail me anytime about anything.  
Oscar

Most of Oscar's message relates directly to the information which Brian suggests respondents might offer in their welcome message. In responding in this way Oscar endorses this model and sets a pattern for those entering the class behind him. The last sentence of Oscar's message is unique however, but it too sets up a model and is echoed, in its emphasis on opening up interaction, by almost all of the welcome messages which followed:

'Talk to you later' (**Michael**);

'Feel free to contact me' (**Nigel**);

'I hope we will all make this discussion board as active as we can' (**Thomas**)

'Willing to communicate and exchange knowledge and thoughts throughout the course'  
(**Fraser**)

'I look forward to discussing various ideas with you all' (**Marshall**)

When asked in interview what had been the effect of such an open invitation to interaction Oscar replied:

I got a few [emails], not a whole lot ... a few people would email me, not a whole lot – mainly in the posts [*discussion board messages*]. That kind of opened up the feeling, I think, by doing that, you know, being a kind of a welcome, being a friendly gesture. ... I just wanted to be friendly. (**Oscar**)

This echoing of what has been written by the previous writer has been reported in other studies of online interaction. Chase et al. report what they call 'style mirroring' in their 2002 paper on intercultural online communication - although their examples are confined to tutor postings - and they report that this effect was visible in terms of tutors responding to the style of the students to

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<sup>2</sup> Belinda, like myself, had been chosen to tutor on this programme after having completed it as a student.

whom they were responding. It appears that by using words which position himself as a willing and open-minded member of this class Oscar has been perceived as doing enactive work for this as a valid position in the configuration of the online class. His classmates have recognised this position, by echoing it and thus endorsing it as a *modus operandi* for this new cultural context. This interaction provides a very clear example of enactment and recognition, implicit negotiation and the cultural nature of what emerges. Mirroring as part of the cultural construction process is found at other points in class discussion too; an example from Jonathan is considered at 6.3.2 below.

#### **6.2.4 First Impressions**

The first gaze over the new landscape for the majority of students who, unlike Oscar, are not 'first on board', will inevitably include a lot more messages from other students. These messages, whilst constitutive of the class landscape, may also be seen as interference to communication since, for example, they may overwhelm the student and prevent them from easily identifying the most crucial or urgent items requiring their attention or response. The messages may also act to obscure the students' view of the overall layout and scope of the course. Whereas Oscar had only Brian's message on which to model his welcome message, each successive student arriving in the class has more ways of 'doing' a welcome message to consider in framing their own appearance online because they have sight of the attempts of all those who have already posted. This also presents them with an increasing variety of positions to negotiate around - positions which may possibly compete or conflict with their pre-arrival understanding of how being an online class member will be. They may not choose to negotiate with all the possible options presented. Linda is one such student.

##### **6.2.4.1 Linda**

Linda is the third student to 'appear' in her class. Both the messages before hers contain references to being part of a developing group and encourage sharing, but Linda's message contains exactly the information that Brian has suggested should be in a welcome message, and no more. In fact, she makes no reference to anyone other than herself and what she expects to get out of her online course:

<b>Subject:</b> Re: Its great to meet you!
Hi All!
I'm excited to be here, and am looking forward to the chance to challenge and expand my thinking.
I'm a lecturer at the University of PQR and work in the School of eBusiness and Management. I teach in a couple of areas - Communication and also Human Resources.

I've only moved into the world of academia in the past few years - prior to that I was a corporate junkie - working for a few large companies in the Learning and Development field.

I'm keen to learn more about flexible learning (particularly on-line), as I know this will help in my current role, and also my small consulting business.

I live on the BEAUTIFUL Central Coast, with my husband, a tribe of children, and a few animals thrown in for good measure.

I'm looking forward to this semester - it will be great to be on the other side of the virtual desk!

Cheers  
Linda

Linda's apparent failure to acknowledge that there is anybody else in the class, despite the evidence available from messages posted by others, and her repeated use of 'I', may be seen to offer readers of her message the impression that she is not interested in interaction with others. Although, her last comment, about 'the other side of the virtual desk', is somewhat contradictory since it seems to position her as someone who is very used to an e-learning environment and, presumably therefore, to online interaction.

Linda receives a reply only from fellow student Margaret who has already made herself very visible in the class by responding quickly to just about every message posted. Margaret seeks to draw Linda into a discussion about workplaces and offers a possible link between what happens in Linda's place of work and her own as a topic for continued interaction, but Linda does not reply. In interview Linda identified herself as a 'lurker' – one who reads messages but does not respond. She also raised the matter of her long 'silences':

... it took a long time to make sure I was saying exactly what I wanted to say and I wanted to try and sound as articulate and concise as I could so, with very little ambiguity hopefully, so I spent a lot of time thinking about what I would say and how I would say it before I actually pressed 'send' and in fact the initial posts we were all asked to introduce ourselves, see that general post? I noted with interest the people who got responses from you and from the course co-ordinator and the other tutor. I'd look at the responses that came through ... and I remember thinking that I didn't get a response and I remember thinking at the time but isn't that right, serves you right, yeah Linda who? Right, yeah, OK!

*... that was important to you that you didn't get a response from any of us? [tutors]*

Yes, and maybe if I had had some sort of acknowledgement then perhaps I would have been a bit more verbose but who really knows, its all contextual too, if I've had a heavy day

then I'm probably not going to want to say anything, I'm just gonna read and go to bed.  
(Linda)

There is a contradiction between Linda's self-positioning and her visible behaviour in class. The work she has done, in her welcome message, to position herself as someone who is not a 'newbie' online is not borne out by her reaction to the consequences of that positioning. This is, in practice, a new environment for her just as much as for others without her prior online experience. The cultural knowledge of online environments that she has to work with on entering the class has not, apparently, prepared her for a situation where she is greeted, and thus her visibility and existence are acknowledged, by her classmate rather than by a tutor. Linda's view as she enters the class seems, as she reports in interview, constrained by the need to respond to the tutor's message and to be greeted (i.e. recognised) by her tutor in return. The frame of reference she has for understanding meeting and greeting in this context is that the tutor will greet the student. The dichotomy between Linda posting her welcome message as a self-oriented statement (i.e. as a literal response to Brian's instructions) and the reaction she infers later - that she needed a response and she expected that it would be from Brian since she understood that he would be the person from whom she would get (and would need and expect) affirmation - calls into question the appropriateness of her previous understandings of the culture of the online world she is entering. For Linda, it seems, a response is not sufficient acknowledgement of her presence in class, nor enough encouragement to respond to the overtures of another student when she is expecting recognition from a tutor, i.e. she has expectations related to the relative status of those in the class. Lack of recognition from authority equates to not being seen and seems to leave her without any identity: 'but isn't that right, serves you right, yeah Linda who? Right, yeah, OK!'

In interview Linda elaborated on her previous experience online which had been in two different organisational cultural contexts, one 'in the corporate arena' and one in using Blackboard in her work as a lecturer in a University:

I guess the way that I saw Blackboard used by [institution name] is the way that I am used to using Blackboard and to tell you the truth I see Blackboard as being, as a platform, I kind of feel that Blackboard is much more teacher focused than it is student focused, I don't think that it is the ultimate self-paced online tool really. I think it is just a means of transferring you know, a traditional paper-based type programme into an electronic environment but I don't necessarily see it as being truly self-paced and I guess I have, the way I experienced Blackboard with [institution name] is the way I see Blackboard used at the University of [institution name] ...

I really like the idea of online and I laughed when I saw it was a Blackboard platform, so I thought that would be pretty easy for me to handle and I was pretty much an internet junkie for quite a few years you know so I quite like the online environment, so I met my husband online, so all that stuff is not really daunting in terms of technology. (Linda)

Linda enters and reacts to the new world of the online class with certain expectations and assumptions about how it will work. These are based on her prior experience of the Internet. She has used the Internet for teaching and uses her tutor view of it to help direct her way of using it as a learner. She has also used the Internet for non-educational, social, purposes (meeting her husband) and this experience is added to the resources she uses to negotiate her new identity. The difference between what Linda expected and what she got online is less surprising when considered in the light of findings by authors such as Conrad (2002), who note how being a learner in an online class is different from simply being an Internet group user. Unlike the situation in some online groups, where users are encouraged to adopt different identities or represent themselves through use of avatars, there is little question in the online class of presenting a position and identity other than the one that has gained the individual admission to the course. Also, the educational environment is politer and closer to day to day reality than that of online social groups – there is a difference in culture. Chase et al. (2002) found that the courses they examined had a 'sub-culture all their own' which 'reflects the values of its developers ... this culture is overtly maintained by guideline creation, and covertly maintained by facilitators and participants' (p.6 of 15). Linda's first view of the online class led her to see similarity with an online learning environment she had known before but not to see the different ways in which her classmates and tutors were undertaking activity in the new environment.

#### *6.2.4.2 Eleanor*

Eleanor appears in class two weeks late by which time her sight line contains over 100 messages across several different discussion boards but she makes no reference to seeing anyone else, except indirectly. Her welcome message, below, is direct and factual both in terms of what Brian has requested, and in terms of the kinds of other personal details which previous messages have offered. In this way her message recognises the norm of welcome message content established for this class, which has been generated through negotiated practice by Brian and the students who have arrived in class before her. However, Eleanor further develops this norm in her last sentence

with enactive work encouraging interaction with other class members and offering them a choice of three names by which they may address her.

**Subject: Re: Its great to meet you!**

Hello! This is my first day on the system. I am from the northern part of Canada and was anxiously awaiting approval from our qualification service, to undertake this program. It arrived while I was away at a horse show this past weekend, so I am working hard to catch up to the rest of you. A little about myself??? I currently teach alternate school to from ages 13 to adult. We are currently using an online delivery system to teach mathematics and communications. I have taught in both the elementary and high school settings since 1985. I have one child aged 2. My husband, daughter and I live on 12 acres of lakefront property which we share with 3 dogs, 4 cats and 4 Peruvian Paso horses. I look forward to working with all of you!  
You may call me EJ, Eleanor or Star (which is the meaning of my first name in [*name of mother tongue*]). (((-:

She receives a number of responses including one from a tutor, below. This focuses on the nature of 'alternative schooling'.

**Subject: Re: Its great to meet you!**

Hi Eleanor, welcome to 46040, glad you made it - I guess you must be our northernmost participant!

I'm interested in the alternative school concept - how do your students come to be there? Have they opted out themselves or been opted out by the mainstream system?

Anne

However, Eleanor's response suggests that her sightline is quite focused on the ground she has to catch up compared to others (and echoes Oscar's comment – at 6.2.1 above - about avoiding 'getting behind'); how she should use the different discussion boards available to her; and how exactly she needs to respond to a specific task, 'having read through all the postings'.

**Subject: Alternative Schooling**

Hi Anne! I am furiously trying to catch up to everyone in readings etc. I have a question for you and will pose it after I answer your question. If you think it'd be alright to post such a query in our own bulletin site, please let me know.

In our case, most students have been referred to us by the high school because they are having trouble in the mainstream. Trouble can range from anything to behavior issues sometimes involving substance abuse, to simple trouble with attendance. We have single parents (teens) and those with a history of social problems. I also teach night school, which offers courses to adult students returning to received high school grad status. We have been involved in the past two years with online delivery of Math and Communication developed in the USA.

My question is related to Activity 1.3....."How has XYZ interpreted these subsystems?" I am having difficulty with what exactly is being asked here....

Thanks,

Eleanor



She keeps her sightline focused by stating her personal position up front ('I am furiously trying to catch up...'), then dealing with the question she has been asked and then returning to the direction in which she needs to move – how to proceed with a course activity. As Linda had done before her, Eleanor's positioning seems to draw on her prior knowledge of both education and Internet norms. She uses the expression 'our own bulletin site' rather than 'our group discussion board'—presumably reflecting her prior online experiences. The query about how to proceed with a course activity is also a first attempt to negotiate actively how the culture of this new learning context works ('if you think it'd be alright to post such a query in our own bulletin site, please let me know'), in particular procedures and norms for where queries can be raised. It appears that from Eleanor's speaking position the suggestion of 'in our own bulletin site' would be an appropriate way to proceed, but there is a degree of uncertainty and this needs to be tested. It is notable too how Eleanor positions herself with her second question: 'I am having difficulty...' offering herself as the source of the misunderstanding about what is expected rather than implying that anyone or anything else might be at fault.

#### *6.2.4.3 Richard*

Richard appears in class, in terms of posting a message to the welcome forum, four days after the official start date, although the course login records show he had already been into class and 'lurked' for three of those four days. The message he posts on his visible arrival is clearly influenced by him having taken more than one look at the way ahead prior to posting it. In clear contrast to Linda, for example, but in common with Eleanor (and others), Richard's first posting (see below) takes account not only of Brian's message but also all those posted by his classmates. In fact, although he attends to Brian's instructions, it appears that frames of reference about how education is done are of less concern to him than to other students. Richard positions himself in relation to his understanding of how his classmates will position him. His message demonstrates recognition of the navigational obstacles he perceives ahead of him, in the form of how his participation will be viewed by others in the class who he positions as 'such fine company', whilst positioning himself as 'alittle out of my depth' due to 'all the Business quals. and past studing that many of you have done' (**Richard**). Once again, Richard's approach is in contrast to Linda's since where she sees similarity, based on her previous experience, Richard sees difference – not least in terms of qualification-based status and writing ability.

**Subject: To say G'Day...**

G'Day

Well after reading all of the other replys on this message board I feel alittle out of my depth. I read all the Business quals. and past studing that many of you have done and think what the hell an I doing amoung this crowd???

Well I am here becouse I want to be a high school teacher and if I had of listened to my teachers at school I would have been teachin when I was twenty four, not starting Uni when I was nearing thirty. I have a few trades, a loving wife, four over-active boys and an old dairy farm outside Toowoomba Queensland to show for the years in between.

This is my second semester of studies and I am still comming to terms with the lifestyle. I am use to going to work at 5 am and returing home twelve hours later to do farm chores before saying a quick Hi to the wife/kids and then crashing for a few winks before starting all over again. The life style of a student is something from a fantasy novel I think.

As I said this is only my second semester of Uni so I may need ALOT of help, I don't mind begging to get what I need so long as I manage to pass. Anyway I have dribbled on enough so I'll leave now.

Glad to be in such fine company and hope to continue communicating with all.

Richard...

P.S With all the spare time I have had over the past fifteen years I never learnt to spell very well, please excuse and wacky word.

Cheers

However, despite having voiced disquiet about how his new classmates may view him, Richard ends with an active expression of hope for future interaction ('... hope to continue communicating with all'). He received a number of supportive messages in reply including one from Brian<sup>3</sup>.

**Subject: Re: To say G'Day...**

Richard and All,

Please dont worry about the spelling etc - the goal here in these forums is to 'express rather than impress'.

Brian

In interview later Richard reflected positively on his arrival online:

when I read the, right at the beginning actually, I read through, we had student pages, you know, basically gave you all the information and the rest of it on - I think I read through half a dozen, maybe a dozen of them and realised I was the only one there without, the only one out of the ones I had read, that didn't already have a university degree of some type and I sort of went, umm, OK. Not that, you know, it didn't worry me that they were better educated than me, the people that I dealt with that had been educated, took a very dislike to, not slang but sorta, I can't pronounce it, I can't put it into words, not slang but a version of slang, rough talk, no, not even rough talk but uneducated talk maybe.

*What kind of impression do you think that they had of you? Your classmates?*

<sup>3</sup> This message is clearly signposted as being not only to Richard but also to others - Brian heads it 'Richard and All'. However, Catherine seems not to have seen this as she notes in her interview that it was a pity that no such message about spelling etc. was posted.

I have no idea, no idea, I can't even think of, I remember I posted something saying that and that it was after I had just read all these pages, personal pages, and thought, I wondered, I said something along the lines of I've got a couple of trades behind me but I am wondering why I am in this, in a class with so many academics and I got a couple of replies back saying, oh don't worry about it you'll be alright kind of thing, its, that was more a, seemed a friendly, there seemed to be a friendly tone to the messages or a supportive tone to the message. (Richard)

Richard's positioning focuses on differences, and his public articulation of his fears, having seen those differences, serves as a catalyst for interaction with and by the rest of the class.

#### *6.2.4.4 Pamela*

Pamela did not complete the online course because, amongst other things, she had neither expected that there would be any interaction between class members, nor was she seeking the daily ongoing commitment which, as she reported in interview, she felt that that kind of interaction required. She had done all her previous study as paper-based distance education where she felt she had more flexibility to study as and when she had the time. Pamela did not post a single message to any discussion board. In fact, the course login records show that all of the twelve occasions on which she logged on to the platform were 'hits' to content materials not communications areas. Had she looked at the discussion boards on her first visit to the site, two days after it became accessible, it might be possible to conclude that she had been deterred by the activity she saw there. However, she only became aware of the understanding (on the part of the tutors and the institution) that she should be participating in discussions because of an email sent to all class members who, after a week of the course, had not posted a welcome message. Pamela's failure to look at the discussion boards immediately on arrival online illustrates well how she did not share the same assumptions about doing online learning as the platform designers (see 6.2.2 above). Comments about, and discussion around, the behavioural expectations for students on this course were obscured for Pamela, not because of the volume of messages on the discussion boards but because her vantage point as she entered the course did not include those boards and the signposts within them. And, according to what she said in interview, she made a deliberate decision that she did not want ongoing discussion with others on the course to be part of her learning experience. Likewise, her frames of reference for coming online did not, apparently, include the idea of trying out all of the possible links within the course and/or reading all the

discussion board postings, two activities which are built into the delivery platform design as un-signposted but essential behaviours for students when they first arrive online.

### 6.2.5 Summary

As a consequence of prior cultural affinities the participants in this class move online with expectations and assumptions about the context they are entering. These conceptual resources assert themselves as the students adapt to the online class. They offer mixed success in helping students to understand the new environment in which they now find themselves. Likewise, these ideas are of variable use in helping students to locate themselves, enact their desired position and obtain the recognition they seek. One category in the frame of reference for doing learning, for example, is recognition from a tutor. Linda doesn't get a tutor response though she feels she needs one, whilst Eleanor (see 6.2.4.2) and others do get this kind of interaction and quite soon reject it. Pamela opts out of discussions at the prospect of *any* response once she becomes aware that interaction is a part of this world, a world which she had expected would resemble the more silent paper-based distance education she has known before. Pamela's frame of reference for doing learning does not seem to include a category for interaction with peers. These differences between participants could be negotiated to a point of common understanding but this does not seem to happen at this stage, perhaps because such interaction is not expected by participants. Instead they have to negotiate a way forward within themselves, individually, in order to proceed or, in Pamela's case, to decide to drop out.

The view of the way ahead for students as they arrive in this class varies both in terms of how many messages have already been posted, and according to how much of the activity yet to come is visible to the student – as manifested in the form of the 'signposts' offered by the content of messages already posted (e.g. tutors messages about expectations of behaviour, levels of participation, etc.). Eleanor's sightline is full of messages but she is still able to see the signposts guiding her to the activities that need to be undertaken and, furthermore, she is able to identify how to clarify those signposts that are partially obscured from her vantage point (i.e. her negotiation with tutors). Linda and Richard may be thought, by virtue of both being Australians and both entering the same new institutional context, to share common resources for understanding the online class. However, their responses and reactions are markedly different. They draw different conclusions about the way forward based on feedback from their experience. In examining how Richard and

Linda frame their cultural experience of the online class and respond to interaction at the point of entry to the class it is already clear just how different (i.e. non-nationality based) cultural influences are at work in framing their understanding of the configuration which is the online classroom. Both, Robert and Linda, for example, share aspects of a common professional culture by being educationalists but, even so, their personal understanding of what this means is influenced by their respective positions in that profession (see also discussion of Harre and Langehove on 'positions' in 2.4 above).

### **6.3 Aspects of negotiation using message boards**

As I noted in 6.1 above, students' first attempts to get to grips with the nature of online learning generally involve making comparisons between learning contexts they have known previously (from experience or reputation) and the new online version. They employ a variety of frames of reference to do this, with varying degrees of success. However, sometimes students' comparisons of the new with the old does not result in a complete, or even an operational, match. When such a situation arose for Pamela she opted out of the class completely. Others, recognising a mis-match between expectation and experience, seem to opt for negotiation in order to assemble a 'new order'. This negotiation process may be largely internal to the student but is nonetheless part of the class negotiation since it impacts on how the individual, over time, participates in the class negotiations. For example, in interview Pamela described how she had eventually, in subsequent courses, overcome her initial inability to cope with online interaction and by the time of her most recent online course could see it as a way of learning which involved being an active member of a community of learners. This involved invoking the idea, drawn from her professional understandings of how education is enacted, that the tutors had put interaction tools in place for a good reason:

... part of me trusts the co-ordinator to put it there for a reason, now I've actually, just in one of the courses I have finished, probably for the first time, understood part of why it's there. (Pamela)

Alternatively, the negotiation process may involve public debate with others in the class, including bringing into consideration information from non-learning contexts in order to elaborate new understandings. Such 'public' negotiation is clear from the messages posted to discussion forums within the class, particularly those where reference points for class interaction are being debated.

Before taking a detailed look at message-based negotiation in practice, however, it is worth considering the mechanics of how messages look and operate and to consider the phenomenon of posting in the context of this online environment.

### **6.3.1 Posting messages**

All online discussion takes place by means of 'posts' – messages placed on the electronic discussion boards. Some postings are in response to prompts by tutors, others are generated by students raising topics for discussion or responding to the messages of others – both tutors and students. Messages appear within discussion boards - specific, limited, online areas under topic headings. These areas can only be set up by tutors. Within any particular discussion board messages appear within threads, chains of connected messages. Any participant, tutor or student, can begin a new thread by clicking on a 'new thread' button within the discussion board area, although there is no instruction visible anywhere on screen to indicate when or how this can or should be done. Once again it seems the platform design assumes students will either know, or be equipped to discover for themselves, this aspect of platform cultural practice. Messages link into a thread by dint of being replies to other messages in a thread, and appear in chronological order in relation to the time at which they are received by the platform server (see also 7.3.1 for discussion of the server time effect). So, when a message is opened and the person opening it wishes to reply they have two options – they may either click on a 'reply' button in which case their response becomes a reply directly linked to the message from which they clicked 'reply'; or alternatively, they may exit that message and begin a new thread. When replying to an existing message the title of the reply will automatically appear headed as 'Re: plus the original message title'. The title can be changed but this, as with other functions, is not indicated anywhere on screen and users often have to be told about this facility by tutors or other, more experienced, students. In this study, tutors were seen to post messages to various discussion boards reminding students of this facility although message records from the course demonstrate that few remembered to do this.

- Re: My thoughts & expectations	Richard	22-Jul-2002
- Re: My thoughts & expectati...	Brian	22-Jul-2002
Re: My thoughts & expect...	LOUISE	28-Jul-2002
- Re: My thoughts & expectati...	BELINDA	22-Jul-2002
- Re: My thoughts & expect...	Margaret	23-Jul-2002
- cultural interference	Hewling, Anne	25-Jul-2002
Re: cultural inter...	Margaret	25-Jul-2002
- Re: My thoughts & exp...	Richard	29-Jul-2002
Re: My thoughts & ...	Margaret	30-Jul-2002
- Re: My thoughts & expect...	AMY	23-Jul-2002
- Re: Mv thoughts & exp...	BELINDA	23-Jul-2002

Figure 6.1 Sample of threading

### 6.3.2 The style and language of messages

In practice, messages looked and operated in a variety of different ways. Some messages were clearly posted as responses to activity prompts from tutors and were literal answers to those prompts. These were seldom addressed to any named person; a few were addressed to 'Dear All'. A few messages were 'stand alone' in the sense that they did not originate from any external prompt but were new topics raised by students, as new threads, but the wording of them did seem to imply that replies were expected. A few others were also stand alone in that they were not replies to existing themes. These messages did not seem to expect responses either but, rather, they read as if they were random thoughts from a student, perhaps indicators of how their authors were changing their thinking as they worked through the course. These messages were not addressed to anyone, either specifically or generally, and did not include any encouragement to respond such as 'what do others think?'. Most messages, however, were replies to other messages, either addressed to the original author of the message or addressed to 'Dear All', or a combination of the two. Many contained pointers suggesting they expected a response from someone, e.g. 'Any thoughts?' or 'If so please help me to understand.'

In terms of presentation style, messages ranged from completely free form, without heading or close, to very structured. Many of the structured messages mimicked letter writing style and included a name at the foot, sometimes a full name, even though the message header gave the full name as recorded in university records (see also 7.6.1 re. university name records).

The style of language used was equally as wide ranging, from formal to informal with varying degrees of spelling and grammatical accuracy (e.g. punctuation and contractions). It was

noticeable that the most formal, from a tutor, received no response at all, either from the student to whom it was addressed or from anyone else.

Margaret:

Your allusion to the guide on the side as "a form of cultural imperialism" posits an interesting incongruity: Cultural imperialism suggests the existence of a binary dichotomy -- the privileged center versus the subaltern Other. Isn't this another way to assert teacher-centeredness? The incongruity seems too diametrically marked to be considered tenable.

What do others think?

Belinda

The absence of any response to this message is perhaps unsurprising since the register of the language used positions its writer outside the register by now established for this class. It is also curious that this message is posted by a tutor and must have caused some confusion to many in the class, although for Simon (see below) may simply have reinforced his view of how writing is done in academia.

The most informal message came from Simon:

hi cath  
thaks for the greeting (:  
yeah i do miss the footie but I'm not a great sports fan although I did catch the world  
cup here - utterly amazing - check out the pic  
  
anyway good luck with the course  
cheers  
simon

This message was part of a short thread of informal welcome-related messages<sup>4</sup> which began with Simon's original welcome message:

Hi I'm simon from bondi beach, sydney. I'm teaching at a "hogwon" in [*place name*], central south Korea. It's my second time in Korea (hey! it's a living!- difficult place, but!) and I've also spent a short time teaching in Japan (loved it.) I chose Korea because of the learning environment and the technology level, which is really high here.  
  
I'm doing the course as I hope to create online learning environments for students students studying English. I've been teaching English to overseas students for nearly nine years but only in the last two years have I started to acquire the theoretical background to progress further.  
  
it's lonely here sometimes, so drop me a line.(check out the dumb pic attached)

---

<sup>4</sup> This thread included also a response from a non-English speaking student who, in Impeccably correct and formal English stated how pleased she was to have found someone who could help her with her English. Sadly I was unable to interview this woman to find out whether she had been conscious of the ironic effect of her message – it seemed, by receiving no comment or response, to go unnoticed by other class members but gives the lie to the assumption by many students that they could recognise non-English speakers by their use of language.



In interview Simon commented on his experience with language on the course:

I'm trying to write like an academic so now I'm writing long paragraphs and I read them again and I think yeah you'll be a professor one day! ... it is quite strange that we have to make things seem so, have to cram so much into so, such few paragraphs and make it all completely unreadable particularly since this is online education and we've got students from countries who have never been exposed to this level of academic reading before. (Simon)

Some messages picked up on the use of specific vocabulary or expressions found in the title of the discussion board or in the earlier messages on that particular board. In the same way that it was apparent that the authors of some of the later welcome messages were mirroring the style of earlier welcome message authors (see 6.2.3 above), the distinctive use of metaphor and rhetoric which characterised messages from Brian, the Course Team Leader, was mirrored in messages from some students. The example from Jonathan, which I discussed at 5.3.3 (and which is reproduced in full as Figure 5.6) actively uses the metaphor of a 'dance' which Brian had set up in his first posting on the 'Dialogical Dance' discussion board. Jonathan's phrases,

As we've gotten into the "dancing", I can see how some posts are like "The lead" in the footwork and some are like "follow up" steps.

And,

Basically what I'm saying, is that there are two general kinds of posts to a forum, which stimulate productive dance. ... If these "lead steps" and "follow up steps" are well mastered and orchestrated, we may be able to really dance up a storm.'

serve to position movement and discussion as a feature of the kind of activity appropriate for the discussion boards for this class.

### **6.3.3 The phenomenon of posting**

The purpose of posting is never clearly stated in this class. In tutor messages, online interaction is repeatedly stated as being 'a good thing' but it is largely left to individuals to interpret the purpose of posting messages to discussion boards (i.e. to use their existing frames of reference for doing online learning to decide how to respond). The most clearly stated analyses of posting as an activity arising in interviews come from those students who were also online teachers, like Catherine: '[it's] about testing ideas. It's about argument. It's discussion.', and Margaret and Pamela who see discussion boards as the online equivalent of f2f seminars.

Until participants post messages they are invisible to others in the class. Their presence may be sensed (as Graham describes them: 'ghosts') but they only become 'visible' when they post:

I am aware that there are people who aren't appearing to me, I'm aware that there are many people who are either not participating or whose name I didn't bother, you know, I didn't read their bio or anything and so I don't know who they are, so I am aware that there's lots of ghosts around in the conversation and usually conversations are dominated by a minority but I don't, I do feel present in that, if I'm participating in it and there are responses coming to questions or comments I make which so far I feel there have been, both from tutors as well as other students then I feel present to the group, yeah. (Graham)

Posting messages makes the author vulnerable since there is no guarantee as to how the message may be received. The whole message needs to be made visible to everyone before any feedback is received so there is no opportunity to mould what is being said in light of audience facial expression or body language whilst the words are being said, as there would be face-to-face. The effect of the words used in a message may not be the same as when those words are used off line. Online criticism, real or perceived, can be:

debilitating ... when you don't have the context of a softening smile or a tone of voice to aid your interpretation ... the written word can be very stark ... there were times when I sort of read a response from someone on the bulletin board and thought 'how could they have thought that, what did they think I meant and did I really put my foot in it there or are they not, am I interpreting their answer wrong this time?' Just tying myself up in knots over what is really going on here. (Margaret)

I think that any perceived criticism is taken, and I think it is ironic that in my experience of both teaching and learning online, that those negative comments are taken even more personally than they would do in the f2f classroom - generally speaking - not by myself but generally speaking.

*Why do you think that is?*

I think there is a notion that we need to maintain civility and that bases itself on the rules of social discourse that we learn in the f2f classroom, we adjust our tone, we don't say something like "look, I think that point is a little bit crappy" we say f2f, "well, I wonder if you could, you know, rephrase that maybe to think about..." and we use our tone but of course we don't have that in the online environment and I think from personal observation that there is a tendency to over compensate for that lack of tone by phrasing things very nicely, and being very careful to, with this perception of not trying to tread on feelings. (Belinda)

I remember that being quoted within the initial discussions - the fact that there was no emotions for an email or to a discussion board and therefore if you said something tongue in cheek or if you said something in jest, ... you had to be careful how, you couldn't just use your normal sense of humour, you couldn't use your normal kind of speech because when its on paper it could be portraying something totally different ...

it has happened to me in a discussion group in, beginning of last year, and I read it and had a sense, I took offence to it and then I thought about it and I thought well why did I take offence to it and it was because if you read it in jest or if you read it as a joke it wasn't funny but it wasn't offensive so if ... I found something that didn't fit right with me perhaps you have to look at it another way, and read it another way to try to, try to see what they were talking, you know, it might have been that they put out, they were meaning to insult you kinda thing but without any emotion in an email, there is no way you can tell so you had to be careful how you read things, I found I had to be careful how I wrote things as well. (Richard)

And, once a message is posted it remains permanently visible unless removed by the original author. Even then, by the time the author becomes aware the message may be having a negative effect and may want to delete it, the message may well have been seen by all others in the class anyway.

A message may be directed at one person but there is no guarantee that that person will see it or respond to it even if it is explicitly addressed. On the other hand, potentially everyone *may* see it whether or not the author wants them to, and the reader may judge the merits of the message according to very different criteria from those envisaged by the author when they wrote it. As Richard noted, above, participants have to be '... careful how you read things' and, eventually, careful how they respond too. Posting was thus approached with 'trepidation' (Amy) and a need for 'bravery' (Karli) by most of the students:

*You talk about reflecting before you write your responses, do you ever think about how your words might be received?*

Well, I always read them after I send them, as if, which is, well, I sometimes wonder why I do that because I haven't sent it until I was reasonably happy with it anyway, if I had time - sometimes I dash off an answer and I'm not bothered but, if its, a point that I want to make, if its important to me then I try to craft it as carefully as I can coz then I am also aware that in print you can be misunderstood and then even if you are careful people will pick up something other than what you meant but, the reason I'm doing it is not so much for that, its just that's the way I feel most comfortable

communicating anyway. ... I would probably prefer if it was something that was a) seen and going to be read by others or b) something that I'm a little unsure about and I'm sort of exploring and don't want to say something really dopey I would much prefer the time to reflect on comments 'cos I enjoy that. (Graham)

#### 6.3.4 The 'code of conduct' – tutors' attempts to guide negotiation via messaging

The only guidance available to those posting arose somewhat incidentally from within discussions on the board called 'Rules of Engagement' (Semester Two) or 'The Dialogical Dance' (Semester Three). Here, students were encouraged to debate rules and norms for their online interaction using a set of prompts, posted by the course team, as a framework to help them do so.

**Subject:** Keeping in step

The expectation of this unit, is that a graduate student will take on board the ideas presented add others from additional reading, personal reflection, workplace research, discussion - group interaction, etc and synthesise these ideas into a position that the students wishes to propose or argue. These discussion forums provide an important resource for the purpose of building position and feeding assessment composition. Your peers in this unit have the potential to be your most valuable resource.

Over various semesters I have witnessed significant variance in terms of group dynamics that come through my courses. I accept this variance as making positive contribution to the learning exchange. From time to time however, and in relation to discussion mechanics, I do identify that extreme difference in perception and expectation can be off putting for some. As a consequence of this observation, I would like us to work a little on building shared understanding and commitment as to the principles and strategy that ought underpin our discussion.

I would ask that you respond in this forum to one or more of the prompters.

The role of the unit leader in discussion forums is .....

I think people should make a post when.....

When people don't respond to my posts I think .....

A good discussion posting is a post that.....

When it comes to discussion boards it annoys me when .....

About discussion forums - I am concerned that .....

Please consider a response. Your input to these prompts will have a bearing upon the success of our semester together.

Brian

This discussion board, in parallel with one discussing pedagogical issues, is allowed to proceed for about two weeks before a tutor-formatted summary of student words and ideas is proposed as a 'contract' of behaviour for future interaction between all participants.

**Subject:** --> Rules of Engagement-summary

Thank you all for your thoughts in contributing to this discussion. Below, I have tried to elaborate a few 'Rules of Engagement' to guide our future interaction. It would seem that we are saying:

[...]

We should post messages:

*[summary of student comments]*

When people don't respond we think:

*[summary of student comments]*

We also struggle against the fears that:

*[summary of student comments]*

A good posting:

*[summary of student comments]*

[...]

Learning is not about right and wrong and should not be a competition; it should be a negotiated shared experience

With this in mind I propose that we adopt the above as our working principles. We will allow them to guide us in the weeks ahead. Should any one of us feel unhappy with them at any time we have the option of inviting negotiation by placing a message on this board.

Looking forward to the rest of our discussions

Anne

**full version available at Appendix Four**

The inclusion of a discussion board debating a 'code of conduct' is an interesting cultural feature of the class. It was course specific – the institution does not require it – and appeared principally to reflect a concern on the part of the tutor team that students might not understand how online interaction should occur. Its inclusion endorses a positive role for negotiation within the class. However, placing this negotiation within the discussion area and without a direct signpost from the course front page, reflects the tutors' assumption that students will all find their way to the discussion area. This in turn positions the discussion as something of concern to those who had already conquered the process of contributing sufficiently to have begun participating. This assumption contrasted with some of the issues raised by students in the course of discussion of the code. Talking about a "good" posting students were clear that this should be courteous and they acknowledged the problem of words not always being received as intended by their author. But, anyone fearing discussion because, for example, they had had previous experience of 'flaming' elsewhere on the Internet - and who might thus be reluctant to post - was unlikely to have made it as far into the course as to find the discussion of the code of conduct. The code was therefore largely the product of those who already knew the rules it contained. It may have served to reassure but was unlikely to reach the view of those such as Pamela who were most in need of assistance to get them to enter into discussions since it was located in a part of the class that she did not attend to. The tutors' attempt to guide students in using the online resources in the development of their online skills may have been motivated by a desire to assist but was hindered by the assumptions they brought to the class and which were not shared by the students. Professionally, participants and tutors were all educationalists but their understandings were only partially shared.

#### 6.3.4.1 *The 'code of conduct' and authority*

The code is also interesting because it does not form a part of the course content posted officially and prior to the start of the course. In other words it does not carry the authority of being part of the knowledge offered by the University, and thus adherence to it may not be thought to constitute a feature of the institutional culture. Likewise, it has unproven authority as a frame of reference figuring in the negotiation of online class culture. Rather, it is generated by enactive work on the part of the tutors and students. Theoretically it is recognised by the class as a whole by means of the completed code being posted at the end of discussions by a tutor, but in practice, as will be seen below, acceptance of the code is not universal.

#### 6.3.4.2 *The 'code of conduct' in practice*

In data from both semesters examined in this study the 'code of conduct' (i.e. the summary of the discussion about how the class wished to conduct their online interaction) was responded to with messages of support and endorsement from students. However, despite having apparently been involved in creating and establishing this public statement of interaction culture, there is little overt evidence from subsequent message threads that this code becomes integrated into students' thinking and action. Certainly messaging on all of the discussion boards was courteous and respectful and, as Richard noted,

... there seemed to be a friendly tone to the messages or a supportive tone to the messages but that was about the only kind of feeling I got from any of the messages, most of them were very down to business, you know, if I asked a question, this is the answer and sort of there was no malice to it but there was no support to it either, it was very matter of fact.

*So was just a means of transmitting information ?*

Basically yes, yes there was no emotion or no context added to it. **(Richard)**

But, when a situation did arise, in respect to student-tutor interaction, that might have been dealt with using the commitment to negotiation contained within the code of conduct (i.e. the 'agreed' norms of the class working culture) this did not happen. In fact it was Brian who, taken to task for a situation where no tutor had responded to one of Margaret's messages, pointed out that this issue was something, from his perspective, covered by the code. His response implies that Margaret had the option to use the code to resolve her dilemma but had not taken up that option. The discussion takes place in the context of an apparently one-to-one conversation between Graham and

Margaret about the roles of the tutor in flexible learning. Margaret responds to Graham's initial message as follows.

**Margaret's first message:**

Hi, Graham

I guess what I mean is that the 'teacher'/mentor still creates the groundrules and dictates what's legitimate. For example, I posed a direct question to our tutors on another forum in the discussion area some time ago.

To me, as a student, posing a direct question specifically to the teaching staff implies that the appropriate response is a direct answer. This course being run on a constructivist pedagogical basis, a direct answer was not forthcoming - the response from teaching staff was to turn the question back to other students for discussion. This is quite legitimate within a constructivist pedagogical mode, but what I actually wanted was a considered opinion, based on experience, from one of the tutors. To this extent, the teaching staff of this course still insist on teaching according to their notions of appropriate pedagogy, ahead of my perception of what is most useful to me. Thus, they still impose their world view on me, even if their world view is based on a perception of me, as student, being in charge of how I learn. Do you see the paradox there?

Margaret draws on her professional knowledge to consider the issues – an understanding of 'constructivist pedagogical mode' - and thus positions the discussion as one between education professionals, but she also takes the position of student for herself ('what I really wanted...' and 'they still impose their world view on me...'). At no point does Margaret actually specify that it was from Brian that she had expected a response but he responds nonetheless as follows.

**Brian's response:**

Margaret/All,

Just like to add a couple of things here. Firstly I would take the opportunity to recall our discussions during "rules of engagement" - that being specifically the discussion relating to "when people do not respond to my posts I feel....."

Moving on from that,

...

Margaret sites, an example where she was looking to access a considered opinion from teaching staff. I recall the instance and of course I could go back and re visit the context (ah asynchronous learning) but I would make these assertions. Personally I did not get involved in that thread (cant remember why) and obviously Belinda and Ann did likewise. The important point is here, that these decisions were not made necessarily on the basis that constructivist learning rules. There are many other reasons why Margaret's point may not have been followed by course teachers. As course leader I feel this is not an issue, as Margaret has many other avenues available to her to pursue the line of thought and interest. Further to this, the group appeared not to hold the desire run with the thread. The group response is not necessarily an issue for constructivism either, but possibly a matter of interest or appropriateness of the specific theme? In conclusion, this course holds no impression that it provides a total and complete learning environment for all stakeholders on every issue. This post is not in any way's contest of Margaret's main issue. It is though, a point of clarification that the non response to Margaret's direct question, was not born through commitment to constructivist law. In hindsight, the non response was a tactical error and Margaret should have had a response either by post or email A response to Margaret, would not have represented constructivism in action, but rather fuel for the constructivist flame that Margaret still has ablaze. – Sorry for the long post guys – and to Margaret – in some ways I guess I may have responded here to your original question?

Brian

Both Margaret and Linda reply to Brian but do not comment on the non-use of the code. Rather, Margaret positions herself by invoking professional authority ('it is an important issue – because we do work with Asian students and providers') and the pedagogical theory which the class has been discussing (e.g. 'The more substantive issue that I am still trying to resolve is the philosophical one of, where are the limits of "constructivist" theory?'). In fact, the issue which had apparently led to Brian's response seems almost to have been forgotten ('but that is the lesser strand for me') in the face of an in-depth discussion about a course related topic. It is perhaps worth speculating whether by being presented in text form and not face-to-face with the benefit of intonation and body language, the relative importance of Margaret's various comments has been lost. This is not just idle speculation. There is no right or wrong answer on this occasion; the issue at stake is that all those who are participating in discussions by posting messages are only able to speak in plain text. The key features of the ideas they wish to convey are present in the form of words but the feelings behind them that give those words power and significance are not visible when the words appear in that plain text format.



## Margaret's reply

Indeed you have, Brian - and yes, I was a bit frustrated at not getting the response I was looking for, but that's the lesser strand for me.

The more substantive issue that I am still trying to resolve is the philosophical one of, where are the limits of "constructivist" theory? Where does adherence to "guide- by-the- side" become a form of cultural imperialism? I am still trying to work out to my own satisfaction whether "flexible delivery" is an inclusive term that permits the co-existence of behaviourist and other models as legitimate in their own right, and appropriate to some situations (eg the kind of environment that seems to pertain in asian cultures) or whether it is exclusive - ie essentially incompatible with these - that you can believe in either behaviourist or constructivist education, but not both?

Some of Belinda's posts seem to me to imply the latter, but not unambiguously.

From my work perspective, it is an important issue - because we do work with Asian students and providers. Should we, if we believe in flexible delivery, take that to mean we meet them on their own terms, and deliver materials that use the 'authoritative instructor' style of delivery that makes the learning most accessible to their students in their learning culture, or if we believe in flexible delivery, does that imply the contrary, that we should provide materials developed according to our (western) ideas of sound pedagogy for 'deep learning' and educate them in the new learning culture as well as the subject matter?

Margaret

This leads to a response from Linda:

Hi All,  
Wow! What a great discussion! I am sooooo mad at my ISP for letting me down regarding my net connection of late!

...

For what it's worth Margaret - I really feel like you are saying everything I have been thinking and wondering these past couple of months - thanks!

By the way Brian, I realise this is covering old ground, but, I, like Margaret, was waiting to read your reply to her direct question in the original forum. I'm sorry that my simple lurking was read as disinterest. This has taught me a valuable lesson regarding on line contributions!

Cheers  
Linda

Linda's last paragraph is an example of cultural negotiation resulting in a public commitment to change and a new way of doing interaction for her in the future. Leaving aside any feelings she may have about this incident in terms of pedagogy or professional understandings, Linda states clearly that this incident has shown her that in the online environment she needs to textualise her position in order to have that position noted and make it significant ('I'm sorry that my simple lurking was read as disinterest'). In this culture even if she doesn't want to say something specific she still may need to make a sign to show she has nothing to say, the currency and value of words and gestures is different in this culture from others in which she has operated. Without a gesture, in text

form, she may not only not be acknowledged as having nothing specific to say, but may, in fact, be assumed to have no interest in the potential right to have something to say (or not).

### 6.3.5 The practice of negotiation via messaging (more generally)

A typical example of the negotiation process at work is the interaction below between Richard, Margaret and Amy. Richard begins this particular conversation with his responses to some of the discussion-starting prompts provided by the tutors.

**Richard:**

<b>Subject: Re: My thoughts &amp; expectations</b>
... When people don't respond to my posts I think ...I'am the only person struggling with this subject. Nobody else needs to reply because they are breazing through.  When it comes to discussion boards it annoys me when ....People only reply to the same people's postings and ignore others. People just parrot what existing posting say.  About discussion forums - I am concerned that ...I don't have the necessary time to reply to all that is necessary.

Brian the course team leader responds to Richard's message to ask him to clarify his second point (about what annoys him) and Belinda responds as follows:

**Belinda:**

<b>Subject: Re: My thoughts &amp; expectations</b>
Hi, Richard:  Let me add a little to Brian's response here concerning your point: "When people don't respond to my posts I think ...I'am the only person struggling with this subject. Nobody else needs to reply because they are breazing through."  Yes, sometimes this can be a dilemma, but one of the strongest facets of the discussion forums is that it's collaborative; that is, we can all contribute bits of information into the collective pool of learning. And, while not every post may be answered, it is the act of contribution to the collective group that becomes valuable.  It may be a vestige from f2f learning that when we "speak" we get a reply. In effect, we are following the rules of social discourse and conversation. Online learning, in contrast, does not depend on traditional notions of f2f interaction -- the "nod of a head" or even the proverbial "good point." Sometimes, silence is effective as a tool of agreement. But, at the same time, I wonder if it's more that we perceive that "nobody is out there" that is the problem? What do you all think?  Belinda

Margaret picks up Richard's point about the significance of silence ('I think this is interesting'), negatively associates it with Belinda's point about the 'collective group' ('I don't have the same feeling Belinda does about silence being warm and supporting') and endorses Richard's view ('I feel like Richard...'). She then externalises and depersonalises the issue by considering it in

relation to how it might be understood across different contexts ('Silence has some very different cultural values around the world ...'), before turning it back as a point for debate in the general context of online education ('Maybe this is one of the differences between online delivery and face-to-face?'). Finally she brings the debate right back to the particular context of this specific class by suggesting they should ask Brian to assist with solving the problem. Her message in full:

**Margaret:**

<p><b>Subject: Re: My thoughts &amp; expectations</b></p> <p>Hi Richard&amp; Belinda</p> <p>I think this is interesting - I work in a traditional distance mode organisation (ie correspondence with frills) so I don't have the same feeling Belinda does about silence being warm and supporting, I feel like Richard that if I can't see a response, then there isn't one and I'm all alone.</p> <p>Silence has some very different cultural values around the world, too - in some cultures (eg mainstream European) it often implies agreement, in others (eg Pacific Island cultures) it implies nothing of the sort, so we probably need to be careful for that reason too.</p> <p>Maybe this is one of the differences between online delivery and face-to-face? Or maybe we just need to work out for ourselves what we mean when we're online together?</p> <p>Perhaps we could see if Brian can get the people at [name of software support company] to provide a place for us to put ticks or smiley faces beside a message to indicate when we agree but we have nothing to add?</p> <p>[just joking, Brian].=).</p> <p>Cheers</p> <p>Margaret</p>
---

This is followed by a message from Amy.

**Amy:**

<p><b>Subject: Re: My thoughts &amp; expectations</b></p> <p>Hi Belinda and all,</p> <p>I agree with you that "sometimes silence is effective as a tool of agreement", but I think it works better in a f2f situation than in online learning. If you read the majority of comments regarding the lack of response to a posting it seems to me that a lot of us are lacking confidence, or need assurance, that we are on the right track. If that is the case, then receiving no feedback will not allay our concerns, rather it will heighten them!</p> <p>I think we have to be very careful about what we post. As Margaret said, different cultures perceive things in different ways. We have to try to be as unambiguous as possible. That's my thought for today!</p>
---

Amy's message strengthens the debate. She uses 'us' and 'we' to implicitly connect, and do recognition work on behalf of, the opinions of others on the course as she has interpreted them from reading their messages. In this way she adds weight to what has already been said by Margaret, Belinda and Richard and positions the topic as one that should be debated by the participants in this context. She further quotes Margaret directly ('As Margaret said') to endorse the

evidence that Margaret has offered to support her own (Margaret's) assertion that care must be taken in understanding and interpreting silence online.

Richard responds to both Margaret and to Amy individually. To Margaret:

**Richard:**

<b>Subject: Re: My thoughts &amp; expectations</b>
Margaret, What you have said about silence meaning differing things around the world is very interesting. I find it strange that in real life I have no problem with being a loner and often chose it over company, yet when I comes to external studies I like to know there is somebody else out there. It is interesting to note that our readings for this subject have stated that to develop the Dist.ED. format there would need to be more people avaiable for interaction with students, so it is an issue that others have thought of as well. Richard.

Richard's message builds on Margaret's and mirrors her pattern of endorsing a personally stated position with evidence from a third party – in this case one of the core readings for the course. Margaret continues the discussion and, as is typical of most of her messages, Margaret's response is very focused on her personal views and experience ('It feels to me' and 'What you say sounds familiar to me'):

**Margaret:**

<b>Subject: Re: My thoughts &amp; expectations</b>
Hi, Richard -  Do you think maybe the thing about choosing to be a loner, yet when it comes to external studies liking to know there is somebody else out there is about having the choice? It feels to me a bit like the difference between choosing not to join in a conversation compared to having the people who are talking choose not to talk to you...  What you say sounds familiar to me.  Margaret

Despite the fact that his discussion with Margaret is visible to the whole class via the discussion board, Richard posts a direct message to Amy along similar lines to the message he has already posted to Margaret.

**Richard:**

<b>Subject: Re: My thoughts &amp; expectations</b>
Amy I too have read many of the postings and take that solice in the fact I am not alone on this issue. I believe your comment that "a lot of us are lacking confidence, or need assurance, that we are on the right track" is also true. Yet in the real world I am sure we are not this type of person, I know I

am not and believe it would be difficult to teach if we were. What do you think changes us when we study in a differing style of "class room"  
Richard...

Amy's message broadens the discussion away from individual experiences towards a more general discussion. Amy's message has two clear levels. She places her own thoughts within brackets, '(Even though I have studied several online modules with [name of institution] I still feel trepidation when posting messages to a discussion board.)', and for the rest of her message she uses 'we' and 'us'. The effect of her style is to make a clearer distinction between individual opinion and wider class discussion.

**Amy:**

**Subject:** Re: My thoughts & expectations

Hi Richard,  
I'm not sure why some of us 'change' in a differing style of 'classroom'. It could be because we are placing ourselves in a new environment that is far removed from the 'traditional' form of education we have all experienced. (Even though I have studied several online modules with [name of institution] I still feel trepidation when posting messages to a discussion board.)  
It could also be a result of the lack of visual cues from which we normally gather understanding, without words having to be said. For example, if someone says something in jest in a class we can tell by their face/actions that they are joking. But online, we can't tell unless they actually write 'ha ha' or something similar.  
I think these two factors (plus others, I'm sure) can combine to unnerve us and make us feel unsure of ourselves and others.  
What do you think?  
Amy

Despite the direct questions posed in each of the messages from Margaret and Amy to Richard, this conversation now moves off on to a discussion about the part that lack of visual clues plays in online interaction. The 'splitting' of a conversation thread is a common feature of discussions where more than two people are involved since there is no function that allows a reply to be threaded as a reply to two previous replies, only to one. Sometimes both the resultant new threads are pursued but most often only one is attended to.

The splitting of threads must be considered a dialogic convention for conversation in this environment, a key feature of its culture and one which impacts on the possible extent of negotiation. There is no reason why a discarded thread topic may not be revived but once the discussion has moved on down a particular route, a new thread, or branch of the old thread, will need to be started in order to pursue the topic because the topics will have become physically removed from each other in the chain (in fact, have become two chains), however close their subject matter may be. It will no longer be possible to consider (i.e. view or refer to) them together.

It is this physical separation forced upon participants in the interaction which makes this “splitting” feature so significant to the interactive culture of the online class. In the f2f class it is entirely possible that a respondent may refer to two different previous speakers in the course of one utterance. Even if only one point is pursued by subsequent speakers the other point is not lost from the ensuing interaction because it remains locked into the history of the ongoing discussion between all the participants in the present discussion location. The topic can be recovered easily by future speakers and reintroduced into the discussion without the need to go to another physical location in order to do so – there is no physical displacement of the utterance as there is online.

Online, the ‘new’ topic will appear as distinct from the original however close they are in subject matter. The splitting feature of responses thus has the effect of dividing up aspects of the same topic and making them appear separate, of disaggregating and making the ongoing negotiation process more complex. In the case of the discussion above, the way the discussion splits suggests that Margaret’s point about choice in who she talks to is not part of the discussion about visual cues, and yet Amy’s comments about seeing if people are joking or not is quite possibly connected since visual cues might impact on whether or not a choice is made to talk. In terms of the negotiation of culture, the splitting feature effectively prioritises some of the issues raised and sidelines others, and this will affect the overall picture of the class culture which emerges. The implications of the splitting of threads for collaborative activity is explored further at 7.2.2.2 below.

## **6.4 Chapter summary**

In this chapter I have looked at the different features of the process of negotiation of culture online and how that negotiation is put into practice in one class. In particular, I have suggested that negotiation begins when, faced with a new context for doing education, participants draw on ideas from other cultural groups with which they are, or have been, associated. I further explored how these ideas intersect and develop when they encounter ideas presented by fellow students, tutors and the institution.

I also suggested that having begun as a process which is internal to the student, negotiation developed more visibly as participants began to dialogue with classmates and tutors and encountered the principles and practices of the institution and the delivery platform. I suggested that negotiation was most evident in the textual messages posted to the class discussion boards

and I discussed the most prominent features of the posting process. In this context I showed how design features of the delivery platform and assumptions by tutors impacted on negotiation and could thus both facilitate or restrict interaction.

In the latter part of the chapter I showed how tutors attempted to encourage productive interaction – and thus negotiation – by introducing the concept of a ‘code of conduct’ and how this met with limited success. I also detailed a typical interactional thread from a discussion board and discussed how this impacted on the ongoing evolution of class culture.

#### **6.4.1 How this chapter contributes to answering the research questions**

The research questions which this study sets out to answer are:

- a) how does construction of online class culture take place and what elements are involved in this activity?

And consequent to that question,

- b) how does the constructed nature of online culture impact on students' participation in online education?
- c) what are the crucial aspects of online culture that tutors need to take into consideration when teaching online?

This chapter goes some way towards responding to these questions. Firstly negotiation manifests itself in the interaction between the many elements, in the class. The primary way in which interaction happens is via messages posted to the class discussion forums and the textual debate that ensues. Elements include not only participants (students and tutors) but also the delivery platform and the activity it facilitates - interaction with course materials and other elements, and resources created, singly and together, by all. Ideas, assumptions and beliefs originating from other contexts, particularly from the designers of the delivery platform and the teaching content materials, also play an active part in the negotiation of class culture.

In the case of the second question I have discussed how at times, despite the best efforts of elements active within the context, interaction does not assist negotiation of a way forward for students. A particular example is the case of Pamela, whose her interaction with the platform did

not enable her to access the resources (tutor and student messages) which might have helped her negotiate an understanding of the norms and practice of participation in this online culture.

Finally, I have shown in this chapter that the negotiation of culture is an ongoing, evolutionary process. This provides some contribution to consideration of the final research question about the crucial aspects of online culture that tutors need to take into consideration when teaching online. However, to answer this question adequately I have yet to consider why the elements, and the activity they generate, are so important in this context. Furthermore, to consider why some activity which might be supposed to facilitate the negotiation and development of class culture does not, in practice, do so.

In Chapter Seven I will consider the practice of negotiation further and distinguish some crucial themes before responding more fully to all the research questions.



## Chapter Seven

### The broader picture of negotiation online

#### 7.0 Introduction

In Chapter Six I began to respond to the research questions for this study by looking at the practice of the negotiation process in the online class. I considered the elements at play in the process and the activities which enacted negotiation. I also provided detailed examples of exchanges of messages (from class discussion boards) in order to illustrate negotiation taking place – with varying degrees of success. In the course of my analysis of the mechanics of the process of negotiation a number of core thematic categories emerged from the data analysis and seemed to transcend the literal meaning of the words being spoken at any one particular point in the activity I was examining. This suggested to me that these themes, - technology, time, authority and, above all, control, - were of wider significance, indeed central to how the online class, as a cultural context and configuration, became better understood by its users. Examining these themes and unravelling their different characteristics and dimensions I found inherent contradictions and dilemmas which participants in the class must manage. This chapter examines these central themes and contradictions in more detail.

#### 7.1 The emergence of central themes

In Chapter Six (see 6.3.5) I explored a conversation between Richard, Amy and Margaret and showed how their exchange of messages is used to negotiate new ideas and to enrich their understanding of the context around them. The exchange also illustrated the influence of elements other than the students on the process of negotiation. I will now briefly return to that conversation to illustrate two themes which not only arise within the subject matter of the conversation but which also have a wider significance and a part to play in how the broader picture of culture in the class can be understood. These themes are 'time' and 'control'.

Superficially little appears to be said about 'time' in this interaction except that Richard notes a fear that he does not have enough ('I am concerned that ...I don't have the necessary time to reply to all that is necessary'). However, there are less direct, but nonetheless significant, pointers to indicate that time is implicated here. In the course of their talk the students recognise they must

take the time to post messages. This is not just for the purpose of saying something about the (notional) topic of the discussion, but also so that they and others can receive replies. These replies offer recognition of existence to the original poster thus making them visible as active participants in the class. Replies also offer students reassurance by providing evidence of the presence of others. Students otherwise feel 'I'm all alone' (**Margaret**) for, 'a lot of us are lacking confidence, or need assurance, that we are on the right track' (**Amy**), 'when it comes to external studies I like to know there is somebody else out there' (**Richard**). Practicing interaction online is not easy; later in the conversation Margaret refers to there being a need 'at least in the short term' for new communicative practices until technology catches up with f2f norms. Amy refers to how she still has not conquered her insecurity about posting messages despite time passing during which she has had the experience of several online classes: 'I still feel trepidation when posting messages to a discussion board' (**Amy**). These comments imply that posting is a new way of interacting, one that needs practice over time; a skill that is difficult to deal with because its consequences are not the same as in the f2f context the students are familiar with; their prior assumptions are inappropriate. Amy reports the dilemma that practising posting messages over time may not actually make the task of posting any less daunting. There is another contradiction in using messages too, since no reply may be assumed to be 'effective as a tool of agreement' (**Margaret**).

'Control' is implicated and interwoven in this exchange too. Firstly, whilst needing others to respond to their messages and validate their existence, students cannot ensure they will get these replies. In fact they cannot even guarantee that their own messages will reach, or be read by, those to whom they are addressed. They can merely post them ('we have to try to be as unambiguous as possible' – **Amy**) and see what happens over time. In other words, they have very little control over this situation; uncertainty is a feature of this culture. Secondly, the delivery platform imposes a strict structure to the responses they do actually get. Richard comments that he is afraid he does not have time for all the messaging required. This is not just an issue of time management on his part, responses have to be threaded in a particular way (i.e. as replies to a single message; an author cannot use a single message to reply to more than one message thread except by posting that same message to two threads). Authors have no power to change that threading pattern even though to do so might be productive for them individually, or serve as a means of strengthening class cohesiveness. An example of this occurs when Richard responds to Amy and Margaret

individually but along very similar lines in terms of content. By offering no way of making a single response to multiple messages, the threading system for messages controls, in part at least, how students respond to each other. This may also explain why reply postings are seen often to recycle phrases from original messages, e.g. 'I agree with you that "sometimes silence is seen as a tool of agreement", but, I think...' (Amy). Saying something once is often not enough, even though messages do, literally, remain visible over historical time. Asynchronicity offers students control by offering them the opportunity to contribute to discussions without their input being time bound to the extent it would be f2f, but the particular (delivery platform) version of asynchronicity in this class simultaneously removes their control over how they structure their participation by permitting them only two ways of doing this. Either they may post a response as an answer to a single previous message; or they may create a new thread, which can 'respond' to multiple previous postings by being addressed to multiple people but cannot be directly linked to any previous message. However, by forcing the original thread to break into multiple threads, the platform message system effectively intervenes to divert conversations away from group interaction towards on-to-one exchanges and discourages the collaborative activity it is supposed to facilitate.

The central themes that emerge from the data drawn from this class - technology, time, authority and control - and the contradictions implicit within them which class participants must manage, are examined in detail below

## **7.2 Technology**

The 'technology bump' is a hurdle which students must overcome to get online. It involves mastering hardware and software in order to gain access to the class web pages. However, technology is not just a hurdle in the early stages of the course. It is an active player ('element' in Gee's terms) in the configuration which is the online class, referred to periodically in student messages. It is also reiterated in students' interviews as a lasting memory of the online learning experience. And, despite students' expectations that their previous experience of computing and other online environments will assist them in the new context, this experience proves insufficient, or inadequate, for many. Technology proves to be an issue which goes well beyond the mastery of IT skills.

Whilst the online class cannot exist without technology it also has difficulty maintaining itself as a class because of the technology it must, inevitably, use. The University provides guidelines for students on the technical requirements for getting online but, even when equipped with all that the University advises, students still cannot be certain that they will get access to, or be able to use, all the resources which it makes available. The University, on the other hand, has to assume that students will have full access to the programmes they offer. Neither party, in fact, is entirely in control of the technology in use. This is partly due to 'physical' interruptions to the hardware required to link students to the University (e.g. service disruption to servers). It is also due to what may be described as the knock-on effects of those physical problems - e.g. the students may be unable to participate consistently in online discussions because the speed at which they can download message boards is compromised by maintenance of the server at their ISP. This is a combination of problems over which no single element involved has control; technology thus participates as an active element in its own right, seemingly with a will of its own. Likewise, the delivery platform, the software which is the interface between the student and the University, is not a neutral participant but reflects ideas and values from its designers and programmers, and it will also play a part in determining how the relationship between technology and users happens in practice.

### **7.2.1 IT Skills**

Knowledge of basic IT software manipulation is often cited as a pre-requisite for online learning and, like many other institutions, the University in this study suggests that such skills will assist students in completing their studies. Indeed, it is a reasonable assumption that knowledge of how to use computers in other contexts, such as work, will transfer usefully to the online classroom context – the actual performance may vary but knowledge of the principles will be adaptable to the new environment. However, from student testimony such knowledge may in practice be as disruptive as it is helpful. As I have noted elsewhere (Hewling, 2002), there in fact exists a fundamentally flawed relationship between the IT skills which students possess when they come to the online class and how successful those students are once online. This mismatch is not because of any shortcoming in the knowledge itself but, rather, because the knowledge cannot be used in a self-determined way – its impact is changed by its relationship with the specific context in which it is being applied. The student may know how to create and post a message but their skill and efficiency in doing so is constrained by the ability of the platform technology to deliver it as the

student expects. On the other hand, for the technology being used (the platform), the key issue is not how the message is composed but how easily the data of which it is made up can be processed, packaged, transmitted, unpackaged and repositioned on the screens in front of other users. On most occasions this process will result in the message appearing as, when and where intended by the originating student, but the student's IT skills alone do not determine this; as noted above such variables as the message threading scheme (see 6.3.1 above and 7.2.2.2 below) and the particular ISP being used (see 7.2) may intervene. Students expect that IT skills will help them but this does not always happen; in negotiation in the context which is the online class skills are but one element. Students may be unnerved by inconsistencies such as messages which appear as neatly presented in one browser appearing unformatted when viewed in another. This may even be undermining for some and may explain why students are seen to employ face saving strategies in some of their messages, e.g. reiterating how much prior experience they have had of IT and the Internet, as if to compensate for the way their message has been disturbed. If the textual marks that appear on the screens of other users are not as the originating student intended but are actually the result of the interference of the technology being used, there is no way for anyone viewing the 'mistake' to know this. The only strategy available to the students whose messages are not portrayed as they expected and who wish to distance themselves from any negative impact as a result of the mis-posting, is to post another message in order to remedy the situation (although, of course, that message will also be vulnerable to disruption too). IT skills promise but do not necessarily deliver. The interweaving of technology and time in relation to posting messages is discussed at 7.3.1 below.

A similar situation arises with prior experience of the Internet. The cultural context of the Internet as understood by a student like Linda, for example, who had used it for socialising and had met her husband that way, is actually different from the cultural context of the online class - which just happens also to be facilitated by a connection to the Internet. The Internet simultaneously seems to be the same (it is the Internet after all), but actually functions somewhat differently when it is the context for formal learning. This dilemma also impacts on students who have not had much hands-on Internet experience. They may *feel* they have an understanding of what it is like, absorbed vicariously, but this does not necessarily prepare them adequately for the reality of online learning. Assumptions drawn from other cultural contexts frame users' approaches to the new configuration

but may mislead because they cannot take account of the enactive work of other new elements at play here.

Prior knowledge may not only be ineffective in facilitating learning, it may also confuse communication rather than simplify it. A sign intended to smooth communication may be read as excluding or 'wrong footing' the reader if that reader does not know how to interpret it or cannot 'see' it in the form it was created; e.g. an emoticon, or text mark, may not, as a consequence of the software the recipient is using, appear as intended by its originator.

Students were obviously aware of these issues; some even suggested that they would have really appreciated a glossary of practical tips to help absorb the shock of the new environment. A number of student and tutor messages on each of the discussion boards for the classes were taken up with 'tricks and tips' for use of specific features of the delivery platform but these could only go so far in addressing the problem of the interference in communications caused by issues of technology. As far as IT skills were concerned, 'more' proved to be no guarantee of 'better', when seemingly familiar happenings did not produce the same effects each time the same action was performed.

## **7.2.2 Social aspects of technology**

One of the oft cited benefits of online learning is that it enables collaborative working between physically remote students thus helping to generate feelings of community which will enhance learning. There was very limited evidence of community, or of collaborative knowledge building related to the subject matter of the course, according to the testimony offered by students in interview.

### **7.2.2.1 *Is this a community?***

The delivery platform automatically generates a template personal web page for all participants. This contains space for a number of details, personal and professional, as well as allowing photographs to be added. All students and staff are encouraged to complete this personal page in order that other staff and students may know something about their colleagues. In practice few students do this. Welcome messages, as noted above (see 5.3.2), offer varying degrees of information about class members but tend to offer only variations on the details suggested by the Team Leader in his welcome message. Students acquire most of their knowledge of others from

messages posted to class discussions, either from message content or from the way in which messages are composed. Knowing about the workplace situations of other students and locating common experiences was important to many:

... part of what I was hoping to get out of doing a subject online was a bit more discussion with other people.

*Did you get that kind of class feeling that you were looking for?*

Pretty much, it was a big difference to the previous course I'd done and in the first half of this year I did another unit which was totally print-based and that was a bit of a rude shock when I came back from an online course and did that one, it was, um, radically different and then I'm doing another online course and this semester I'm really enjoying it, way more work but I feel like I'm getting more out of it because of that interaction ... I've been able to get an idea of what other people are working in. In the other subjects I had no idea if I had any classmates, let alone what they were doing or thinking so it's really interesting to see the different contexts that people are working within, a few of the projects that people are working on this semester relate very closely to what I'm doing in my work now so that provides an extra sort of resource that I could delve into that relates to my work and also getting feedback from people in terms of making a post and getting some feedback and sifting out ideas. (Karli)

Belinda recalled that when she had been a student on the course other students' responses to her messages had offered her assistance with her learning in a different way:

*Tell me, what was the role of your peers in your learning online?*

When they would respond to my posts and question or challenge a point I had made, because it meant that I felt I needed to go and qualify that or do more research or rephrase my ideas which meant that I had to reflect on my ideas and the process of that made it clearer in my mind - it was almost like enforced revision which was great. However I will say that I thought that, I wished that, it had happened more often - there were only a handful who were prepared to do that. (Belinda)

But there was little offered by the students who were interviewed to suggest that any lasting bond was formed; classmates were simply, as Karli put it, 'an extra sort of resource'.

Perceptions of speakers in class as individuals were limited (although as I have noted above the knowledge of their existence was critical to the quality of the other students' feelings about the class) and this was combined with technical issues in determining how interaction was perceived

by participants. Several interviewees remarked on the frustrations of the slow display of message boards once there were more than a few messages on the board, and how this deterred students from even trying to take part in lengthy discussions. The platform offered the facility to display only unread messages but students reported this of limited use. Using this facility often resulted in more frustration because when the students were unable to remember details of the original messages which had prompted the new ones, they had to return to the discussion boards and display the whole board anyway in order to make sense of new postings. This presented a further barrier to building, let alone sustaining, collaboration and community. Few students persisted in confronting the frustrations of the discussion boards beyond the first few weeks of the course; as **Graham** remarked, after battling for a while the topic had to be very interesting for him to bother continuing.

#### *7.2.2.2 Collaboration?*

Looking at the messages posted to discussion boards there was some evidence of students actively seeking responses to their messages, particularly those students who were physically more remote from the University. This seeking activity took the form of ending postings with open questions, or comments which might encourage discussion. However, was this an indication of a desire for collaborative working? It seems unlikely. With few exceptions (the discussion at 7.1 is one of them), message threads seldom showed evidence of any particularly sophisticated negotiated collaboration being undertaken by means of discussion postings. The themes of consecutive messages might be the same and different views were raised but little argument, when defined as sharing and negotiating different points of view, developed. At least part of the responsibility for this lies with the platform which, as noted above, will only thread new messages as a direct reply to a single previous message. If a new thread is started in order to address discussion points from more than one previous message then the logic of an ongoing discussion is likely to be disrupted since the two threads may not appear consecutively. Literally, the main thread may be lost. Likewise if a poster wishes to address a particular author and does so by pressing the reply function on one of that person's posts rather than by creating a new thread, an ongoing discussion may well become littered with other sub-threads which do not have a bearing on the main discussion (see Appendix Five for the full thread, as it appears on screen, of the messages discussed at 7.1 above). Messages will also always be headed with 're:' and the heading of the previous message - unless the author of the reply remembers to change the heading. It can be very difficult on a busy board to locate the right message to respond to in order to move a



discussion forward if there are many messages with the same title and author, especially as the time of posting is not listed when the message thread is presented in title form (see sample of threading at 6.3.1). And, when a whole thread of messages is displayed the platform will not necessarily display them in the order in which they were posted (see Appendix Six/Seven for the 'conversation' at 7. as ordered by the automatic platform threading and for the 'conversation' as ordered by the time at which messages were posted, and Appendix Eight for a graphical demonstration of how the automatic threading effectively divides the conversation into two). This threading-driven ordering may indeed produce what appears to be a coherent 'conversation' but, equally, it may not. And, if a new message is added, this may change the appearance and order of the discussion for subsequent readers.

So, if the purpose of message-based discussion is not a desire for collaborative working, what then is its purpose? There are many references to students' fear of 'silence' in what they have been led to expect will be an interactive environment. Students are aware also that posting no messages amounts to invisibility for them both as individuals and as members of the class as a whole. Discussions provide reassurance of existence and confirmation that one is not, as feared, 'alone in the universe'. And this support is fostered further when messages make direct reference to named individuals, or quote from other people's messages – reaffirming the existence of others around (see, once again, the dialogue at 7.1 above). Participation in discussions enacts membership of a group and thus a role within the evolution of this online class context; by offering the chance of negotiation with others it is the means of developing personal and shared understandings of a new environment. Students suggested that they had benefited from hearing the experiences of others working in the same field but they also remarked that whilst this had added interest it had had little impact on their views or on their learning. For most, the advantage of hearing other voices was focused on the fact that it made them feel less alone, although several also remarked that they had little time for what Catherine called 'idle chit-chat'. Participation in discussions may be seen as a search for community, in the sense of providing evidence that the class contains others, not in the sense of establishing a long-lasting or cohesive group.

### **7.2.3 The contradictions and dilemmas of technology**

'Technology' gets blamed a lot by online class participants. On one level this is an accurate attribution of blame – many problems do have an underlying technical or technological element

(e.g. server maintenance, ISP download speeds, etc.) and technology is a convenient and easily understood scapegoat. However, what is more critical to the development of class culture are the contradictions that are inherent in using technology and those which arise when use of technology intersects with the other elements which configure the online classroom. These contradictions can be summed up as follows.

#### *7.2.3.1 Practice does not necessarily make perfect*

Practice of skills (e.g. posting) or manipulation of tools (e.g. use of virtual class facility) only improves students' performance in a limited way. However often students have used IT skills like message creation and however competent they are there are always other physical barriers to success – and these may be different on each and every occasion. Supporting technology - like servers or ISPs, for example - may intervene or fail and subvert whatever students are trying to do. Prior skills and competencies are of limited usefulness in improving students' performance of even routine tasks; supposedly generic transferable skills, like word processing, do not, in reality, transfer universally. Some basic manipulative skill with computers is essential for anyone wanting to learn online, but less significant in assisting performance than is the confidence to use the environment and being open to learning through 'doing' participation.

#### *7.2.3.2 Limited negotiation*

There is only limited potential for participants to negotiate with many technical functions in the online class; e.g. students overwhelmed by the number of messages they see on the discussion boards have no way of filtering them - by topic for example - to suit their own needs. They can opt to display only new messages, but message body content cannot be previewed before full display, and unless the authors of the new messages have amended the title lines to make them unique, many messages will be seen to have the same title despite their content being different. Discussion board messages, having once been displayed on screen, will reappear every time the board is displayed - they cannot be erased permanently, just 'deleted' in terms of being 'marked as read'. Attempts by users to adapt the platform to their own needs and preferences are futile. The flexibility users have been promised isn't there and this leads to confusion; control is not in the hands of those to whom it seems to have been given (i.e. students).

### **7.2.3.3 *What you see is seldom what you get***

There is no way for any participant to be certain that what they see on the screen in front of them is either the up-to-date picture (in terms of all the messages that have been posted to the board so far), or the same view any other participant may be seeing (either in terms of being the complete picture, or in terms of looking the same, i.e. screen layout).

### **7.2.4 Summarising technology in the online class**

Technology is not neutral or passive in this class. It is an active participant because its interactions with other elements lead to unpredictable results. Matters are complicated further because technology is not a single unified element, it has many strands which may conflict with each other, e.g. posting a message is not just the technology of creating the message and pressing the button to send, it also includes how the software was designed, how well the server is working today and, even, whether or not the electricity stays on throughout the activity. Since participants are not dealing with a single element they find it hard to learn its ways and idiosyncrasies and thus how to negotiate with it; even with practice in using it over time the outcomes of interaction with it remain unpredictable and unreliable. The online class depends on technology for its continued existence but technical features which might support community and collaboration equally serve to undermine them because of their unpredictability – servers fail to connect, downloads are lengthy and interaction is disrupted by the design of message threading. Interaction mediated by technology in this class serves mainly to provide evidence to individuals that they are not alone there rather than to provide them with the opportunity to collaborate.

## **7.3 Time**

There are two basic kinds of time which students must reckon with in the online class: historical time and asynchronous time. Each of these has other connotations too.

### **7.3.1 Historical time**

Historical time presents itself to the class by means of fixed start, end, and assignment dates. There is some flexibility available to students to move these dates forward on the calendar, but they remain fixed relationally (i.e. historically) in the sense that the start comes before the end and assignments have chronologically arranged submission dates.

A sub-category of historical time is geographic time. This is a globally recruited class and despite all beginning their studies on 22<sup>nd</sup> July this same date can vary according to geographical location. Thus 0900 on 22<sup>nd</sup> July may be the starting point for all students but will only, in fact, be 0900 on 22<sup>nd</sup> July for those students who are in the same geographically determined time zone as the University. For some this 'fixed' date may in practice occur on the 21<sup>st</sup> or the 23<sup>rd</sup> according to where the students are physically located.

Historical and geographic time were most noticeable to students when they were submitting assignments and when they had to be involved in any synchronous interaction (e.g. virtual classroom discussions). They could also be important when posting messages to discussion boards. The university delivery system is supported by four servers worldwide and these are only synchronised periodically through any 24 hour period. The information held on any one server might differ from that on another at any given point in historical time. Logging in to the online class does not guarantee that every action once logged on will be undertaken by the same server. For example, a student logging in to view a message board will have that board displayed on screen by whichever of the servers first receives the command to display. However, as soon as the student manipulates what is displayed in any way and thus sends a command to the server to do something, that activity will be executed by whichever server the system directs the command to – not necessarily the same one that executed the first command. If the student then wants to reply to the one message they have opened then again the command will be executed by whichever server receives it, and again, it may not be the same one as executed the previous commands. Anyone executing a series of commands via the server might find a different 'version' of history, in terms of messages visible, each time they display a different message or discussion thread. This might have the effect of removing, or defying, historical time if that person's previously posted message no longer appears (i.e. has yet to appear on the server now being viewed). This phenomenon was, unsurprisingly, a source of disquiet to students. As a tutor I received many messages from students unable to work out what was happening, especially at weekends when disruption seemed most apparent. This was an aspect of the online class life to which students found it hard to reconcile themselves since it disrupted interaction, defied consistent explanation and could never really be planned for or controlled as it was an unpredictable occurrence. Even when students knew what caused problems with historical time it was not always possible for them to accept it as a purely

technical fault, and they could be seen doing face-saving work in subsequent messages. Eleanor has a message appear twice and is given advice on removing one version, to which she responds:

Thanks re: the deletion trick. I was unaware that one could do that once a duplicate was posted. I didn't realize a dupe had come up until I came back at a later time. I didn't submit twice and thoroughly read the info on posts not coming up immediately and the reason for that problem, before I went into the boards. I am not sure why the duplicate was made. Perhaps the technical staff might know of other reasons for this aberration other than a double submission. In any case, I suppose it's not worth that long of a discussion. No harm done.((((--: (Eleanor)

Subsequently another student suggests that perhaps Eleanor had posted the message twice because the first time around it had 'disappeared' due to the multiple server effect (see below). This prompts her to post another message reasserting evidence of her competence ('I have used bulletins etc, for a long time ...'):

Nope, sorry. I didn't post twice. I have used bulletins etc. for a long time and was surprise to see a dupe come up. Thanks for the heads up that there could be a server glitch. (Eleanor)

Eleanor had another interesting encounter with time (which I have discussed for other reasons in 5.3.5 above). In that instance she posted a message and then shortly afterwards posted a footnote message to it. Looking at how the messages are timed by the delivery platform there is a whole hour of difference – part of the server updating delay effect. And, although no-one remarked upon it, it is quite possible that for some viewing that discussion thread her footnote may well have appeared before the original message to which it refers. The absence of comment may also indicate that others had learned that this was a feature of time in the online class culture.

The four servers which the University uses to deal with the volume of all online class activity play a very significant part in online class culture for participants in this study because, as we saw, they only intersect periodically over any one 24 hour period. Some messages therefore remain invisible to students logging in from other servers during the intervening period. If updating of one server is happening, students may, without knowing it, find themselves connected to different servers on consecutive logins. For any student who logs in to get messages, downloads them to draft responses and then goes back online to post responses, there is a very real danger that when they log in to post their responses the messages to which they are responding will have 'vanished' - simply because, unknowingly, they have logged in to a different server on the second occasion. This is not only disconcerting but for some students means that they never do respond, or having

taken time to compose a response find it 'disappears' (like Eleanor's) or appears at an inappropriate time (or place) and do not bother to repost. Students may also find that by the time they are actually able to get a response posted, someone else has responded saying what they were intending to say and the impact or effectiveness of their message is thus compromised. The 'four server factor' contributes greatly to the unpredictability of the delivery platform as seen by the students in this study; working with only one, as happens in many institutions, would eliminate many of the multiple effects of time.

Ironically, historical time passing can be less easy to appreciate online than off since many 'fixed' points are not, in fact, fixed. Some students described how they had expected that the flexible timing of online activity (facilitated by asynchronous time) would make learning and studying easier but that, in fact, experience had shown them it was much harder. Keeping up with what was happening required a much more regular commitment than they expected since to keep up with the thread of discussions they had to log on quite frequently. This was compounded for some by a realisation that they had to take more responsibility for their own learning:

... when I started it off it was a big shock

*What was the biggest shock factor?*

It think that while I had known about the existence of chatrooms and forums and things like that this before I wasn't really aware of how much responsibility was upon myself to teach myself to learn - that is learning from myself. Before, I think it was more provided for me and this time its not quite the same. (Simon)

This realisation might arise because the student had been used to the culture of the undergraduate programme where learning activity was more directed or, where they had come from paper-based studies, because student responsiveness was positioned as having a different role in the traditional distance teaching and learning culture.

### **7.3.2 Asynchronous time**

Asynchronous time is at the heart of online learning. It is generated by the working of the delivery platform which records all interaction as messages and displays them on demand. In this way, 'conversations' are not lost as words are spoken but can be continued over space and historical time, transcending what were previously barriers which could only be overcome by individuals

displacing themselves to allow for f2f interaction. Theoretically, this asynchronicity will advantage students whose language skills make it hard for them to respond quickly, or those who are shy about speaking publicly, or those who have disabilities making f2f difficult but which are overcome by using text-based communication.

Many of the issues that students have with asynchronous time are closely related to those issues already described above as elements of historical and geographic time, e.g. the students' inability to control the appearance and disappearance of elements of conversation (messages). The advantage of asynchronous time in permitting conversations across historical and geographic time becomes a complicated problem because the student can never be sure where they are in the conversation which appears before them on the screen. They can never be certain that what they are seeing is what anyone else is seeing. The student can only post in response to what they can presently see, but by the (historical/geographic) time what they post is visible to anyone else what they are posting may no longer actually be sensible. The content may not be sensible because its moment may have passed, as someone else has posted meantime, or it may not appear on screen in the position in the conversation thread which its author expected it to have.

Students report spending a lot of time polishing their postings in order not to appear foolish but, to an extent, this is wasted time as they cannot control how their words will be presented by the message threading system and the positioning that will be determined by the multiple server system. Positioning their words, and indeed themselves, is frequently beyond their control however hard they try. This is not a situation which is greatly helped by practice or experience and there is little evidence in this study that participants are aware of its complexity. Like Eleanor (above) they are aware that things go wrong but they often don't know why this might be happening. There is a delete facility (which allows only deletion of messages by their original author), which may help users by removing messages which end up out of place, but there is usually an historical/geographic time lag between posting and deletion which means that others may have seen the misplaced message, may even have responded to it in the meantime, so that even if it is deleted, traces may still remain to haunt the author. Whilst students may not be aware of what is happening technically the technical issue is still a problem for the class simply because it is disrupting student activity there.

Asynchronous messaging permits messages to appear to discussants (students and staff) when they choose to see them (notwithstanding that what they see may not be a completely up-to-date picture of all that has actually been posted) and this offers an impression of immediacy to the interaction. This enhances feelings of 'being there' but also encourages the expectation of immediate response, which is unrealistic in terms of historical/geographical time. The permanence of messages over time should reassure students that they can remain part of an ongoing conversation even if they are not able to be online permanently. However, many students report feeling that they must log on more often or they will miss out on interesting discussions despite the fact that those discussions remain visible over historical/geographical time.

### **7.3.3 Summarising time in the online class**

Twenty four hours a day, seven days a week access gives the online classroom the contradictory appearance of being both timeless and immediate. The contradiction prevails across all class activity. This is problematic since students rely on message activity to maintain their interaction with others; it also affords recognition and thus furnishes them with identity - as students and as members of an otherwise invisible class. Asynchronous interaction which should reassure, as a result of the permanence of messages over time, actually raises feelings of insecurity because the feeling of immediacy it also engenders is untenable in historical/geographic terms. Instant responses from others, such as tutors, cannot actually be realised "24/7" because of physical constraints, and all responses are anyway vulnerable to interference from the vagaries of servers and platform-driven threading of messages. Once again the cultural norm of flexibility promised by the institution is not borne out by the reality of a number of critical contradictions. In summary these are:

- Asynchronicity offers the option to do things (e.g. post messages, complete course tasks, etc.) when the participants wish but historical and geographic time mean that the results of this activity are often unpredictable
- However hard participants in the class try to keep up to date with online 'conversations', asynchronicity (and server technicalities) prevent them ever getting an accurate picture of the latest version of those conversations
- The 'four-server factor' considerably complicates all kinds of time in the online classroom
- Asynchronicity means that (historical) time can be 'stretched' to allow for posting more messages but historical time also does not slow down sufficiently for those in the



conversation to keep up with the results of all the 'parallel' historical times that have engendered all those extra messages. Furthermore, failing to keep up with all the messages means participants may lose the thread of the conversation altogether. In this respect, time-saving devices like displaying only unread messages compound the problem when threads become obscured by unclear subject headers and message strings.

Some features of time that I have discussed are undoubtedly particular to the server and infrastructure set up of the particular university being studied, in particular the use of multiple servers. I have taught online in another institution where this did not occur. However, although the multiple server effect may be particular to this study, in online classrooms more generally, disruption to the patterns of interaction that users expect on the basis of their experience f2f and elsewhere arises, and this suggests that this is nonetheless an issue of wider significance. Uncertainty about the status of messages that students post and how these will position their authors is a feature of the online class generally, arising as a consequence of the interaction with other elements at play in the class configuration as much as because of the technology used to create or display the messages in this particular class.

## **7.4 Authority**

The discourse of flexibility called upon in the university's self presentation of this and its other courses (see 6.1.2 above) implies to students that they have some degree of authority within the class and the learning context. At the same time, however, the need for tutor recognition expressed by some students suggests equally that importance and authority is vested in tutors. Issues of authority are implicated at various points in class discussions and when students are talking in interviews. To understand authority in the class culture further it is valuable to look first at what may be termed institutional or organisational culture. These ideas will frame further consideration of authority in relation to how tutors and their role, issues of knowledge, and of assessment, were perceived and understood by students.

### **7.4.1 Institutional culture**

The institution in which the online class in this study is based is driven by mission, vision and values statements which contextualise the institution's activities and which are posted publicly on

its website<sup>1</sup>. The values statement in particular frames how activity will take place and the philosophy behind that activity:

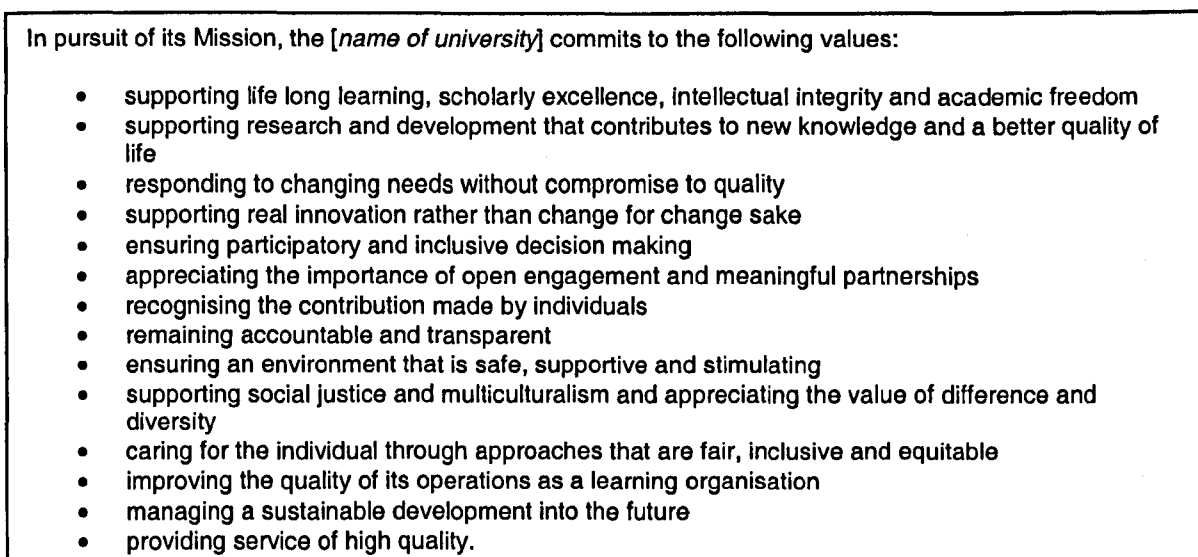


Figure 7.1 The University's values

Although not actively held up for discussion as a context (situation) in the online class, these statements offer an influence on what can and will happen in the class (e.g. by stating principles which will apply to the kinds of learning the institution favours, such as flexible and online delivery) and therefore play a part in the doing of culture in the class.

The University culture is also impacted by professional and disciplinary cultures. Ways of working and a general philosophy are apparent across its Faculties in the sense that all departments will adhere to the core principles already mentioned. However, different corners of the University planet do so in different ways. The Faculties of Education (where the students in this study are based) and of Management are at the forefront of online delivery of programmes. In management the majority of students are part-time in-service students and require flexible delivery in order to be able to maintain their employment. Thus the ideals of the professions and disciplines within these faculties drive flexible delivery to be seen as particularly suitable. In education, for example online delivery exemplifies the principles of learner-centred distance learning which the faculty of education is known for and for which the University has received international accolades throughout its history.

At the course level there is also an element of institutional culture which is encouraged by the Course Team Leader in his choice of teaching assistants from within the graduates of previous

<sup>1</sup> (<http://www.usq.edu.au/aboutusq/default.htm>)

iterations of the course. His continued use of past course graduates within the running of new course iterations both maintains certain core values and serves to engage new external influences from the experiences of those who had moved on into field practice after graduation. For the course, this ensured sustainability of its distinctive culture without freezing it in time. The ongoing development of class culture was equally sustained by actively encouraging students on the course to bring in new materials, and thus fresh ideas, and log them on a discussion board specifically designated for this purpose.

#### 7.4.2 Tutors

The role of the tutor in the online classroom was the subject of much discussion, particularly through the medium of the discussion board which dealt with how the class wished to organise its online behaviour. Discussions were eventually summarised (by myself as one of the tutorial team) using the words of the students who had participated.

**Role of unit/group leader(s):**

- should be not just 'a guide on the side' but, like a lantern, shed light on possible paths ahead
- should encourage the participation of all according to their needs
- should moderate, provoke, curtail or challenge, according to the need of the moment, in order to move our learning forward – maybe 'light a few fires'
- should respond in a timely and succinct manner
- should add subject expertise and offer experiences which others may learn from
- should be flexible!

But, it is worth remembering that at the time of undertaking the discussion some of the students had only just begun their first online learning course and so had little experience on which to base their responses. By the time interviews with students took place, however, all those interviewed had completed at least one full online course. Most, like Karli and Graham quoted below, had completed two or three and some had completed the whole masters programme. That their comments are based on having completed more than one course adds significance to them as the students are less likely to be affected by the particularities of experience with any one tutor and their views are thus of more general significance.

*How do you perceive the role of the tutor or moderator in this online environment?*

That person's been sort of guiding and prodding people in directions as opposed to answering questions, the course has been going for 4 or 5 weeks, probably over that time I already notice that the type of feedback she has started to give changed.

*In what way?*

At the start when we were in the introductory forums and so on there was a very conscious greeting of each person and trying to link people up within the course whereas now it's a bit more of a guiding hand like the discussions and so on, a bit of summarising happening.

*So how does that relate to the kind of interaction that you would expect in a f2f classroom?*

Probably quite different but then again the role in the f2f class is sort of being a part of, a lot of the time, the role of the instructor has been to provide the content whereas that's all provided separately anyhow, somewhat of a grown up approach, that's simply the way I'd put it. (Karli)

I still do approach it as if there are some people here who know stuff I don't and they have also had a disciplined approach to it which comes with qualifications or whatever and therefore they are the ones who are heading the unit or teaching it even though they say everyone has a valid contribution to make and up to a point that is true and I agree and comments do come up that I find valuable but there is no doubt that I place a higher value on comments coming from a tutor or lecturer. (Graham)

Despite their experience of several courses, Graham seems to retain many assumptions from a f2f teaching and learning paradigm whereas Karli has developed a new paradigm, 'a grown up approach' as she calls it, for online learning.

A wide range of opinions about the role of the tutor online was offered in the course of interviews with students. Individuals' perceptions of the performance of the same tutor differed considerably.

A tutor (not from the class in this study), who was noted as a model tutor by Belinda, for example,

seemed to have the uncanny ability to know when to step in and when to back off ... and it was just this kind of balancing act, that he seemed to be able to sense when he needed to prod and when he needed to disappear completely; (Belinda)

was viewed somewhat differently by Simon:

I'm very, very aware that he is there because I get emails from him, there's lots of things on the board so he is all over the place - he's certainly reading and monitoring, that's quite apparent! ... I think he's gotten a bit too fancy with it. (Simon),

whilst a tutor (again from a different class) viewed as good by Simon was felt by Amy to have been discouraging:

[she] didn't give two hoots and never replied to anybody's emails unless you sent her 6 different emails each about the same thing and then she grudgingly gave you a reply, so people just dropped off one by one, they never bothered. (Amy)<sup>2</sup>

At the time of interview Belinda, Margaret and Catherine had all been both students and tutors online. They acknowledged that their experiences as students had had considerable impact on their teaching, and vice versa. For Margaret it was important for tutors both to keep interaction going within the discussion boards, and to make sure that this was relevant interaction related to the class topics. In interview she drew a parallel between the class and a shop, hypothesising that since a busy shop will be more likely to attract customers because it is obvious to observers that it is a place of interest to others, a busy discussion board will encourage more students to post messages there. For Catherine, making interaction meaningful meant students, as part of a community of learners, 'getting beyond "hello, my name is Fred"' in order for the interaction to call into question students' existing knowledge and enable them to build new knowledge. As she describes in interview<sup>3</sup>, this might involve a long slow process of getting students to interact with each other:

the tutor has got to do more than just be there. They've actually got to prepare some discussion starters, scenarios, problems and to know when to throw them in and that means you've really got to know everybody in that group and where they're at to be able to make that relevant so that you can drop into a discussion say, Jonathan, you are in this situation if you had a Principal that did this, how would you handle that, now how would you solve this problem? Based on that reading what would you do? And, it's not until you can do that that you start to push them up ...]If you want everybody to participate at the party what you do? The host tends to go round and push people and I introduce them to each other, they won't introduce themselves, you take them by the hand and you say come and meet some people and you introduce them and that's what these

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<sup>2</sup> The interviews with Simon and Amy are good examples of occasions on which I had to be wary of my own reactivity. As a student I had been in the class with Amy and personally shared her view of this tutor. Likewise, I personally shared Belinda's view of the other tutor and I noted in my research diary that there was a danger here that I must pay attention to this in analysis in order not to discount Simon's views on some topics simply because I felt he had misjudged aspects of the behaviour of tutors whom I knew.

<sup>3</sup> And in doing so draws upon an extraordinarily wide range of other cultural reference points ranging from childcare to party giving.

activities do. Actually you are taking the lurkers by the hand and saying here's two people you can safely play with. And just play this little game. Just like kids in the playground, just play this little game among the three of you. Now, these three and these three, you could play safely together and even if you can only get six or twelve playing together, whenever one of them posts one of the others, at least, is likely to respond and once people get responded to they tend to start.. and that's why I like, you know, sort of, just in the first couple of weeks to get over the communication problem, and get them going, but it does take some handholding. (Catherine)

Belinda felt she was able to see learning happening for her students since online she was 'seeing a process not a product'; the skill for a tutor was in knowing when to intervene and when to hold back and keep out of conversations. Margaret described her concern about not losing sight of students who were not posting messages but rejected a suggestion that the tutor role was that of 'sheepdog' rounding up the students and keeping them on track, in favour of the analogy of a 'seeing-eye dog' and a more guiding role for the tutor.

Bearing in mind these views of the role of the tutor there are two sub themes of authority which impact on the development of culture in the class in this study, authority over knowledge and, when tutors are positioned as representatives of the institution, authority in matters of assessment. I will examine these in more detail in the remainder of this section.

#### **7.4.3 Knowledge**

Firstly there is the question of establishing who has authority over knowledge. The astute student may note that on the course front page the authorship of the course content is attributed to names that do not appear in the course team, but there is no evidence in how students talk about course materials that they attribute ownership of course materials to anyone other than the Course Team Leader (sometimes referred to as the course moderator):

Most useful [*parts of the course*] would have been Brian's study material.  
(Graham)

For others there is some confusion over the role of the tutor but an underlying assumption that the content presented is nonetheless provided, more or less effectively, by the tutor:

I had two moderators in my two units this time around, one a real academic and so I'm really getting lost in all sorts of places and he's writing lots of emails to us all having to explain it all again and again and again to us so I think he's gotten a bit too fancy with it

whereas the other lady who's doing our text-based materials thing is, has presented it beautifully, as a piece of text-based writing its fantastic, and its really clear and simple I have read almost all of her notes almost straight away and it was quite clear, everything was really, really, really clear especially things like the headings in the set out and the layout. (Simon)

There is wider debate over the assumption that authority in terms of knowledge (as opposed to who owns it), lies with the Team Leader and not the tutors:

I expected tutors to be able to add value but I really tended to look more, I don't know whether you are counting him as a tutor or not, but Brian I guess as the key, someone who would be key to input information and learning and if the tutors did that as well then that was great but my initial impression was that you guys weren't as vocal as he was, I saw him really as a driving force to start off with and I saw him when he replied he would often have lengthier replies that had a bit more meat to them - I think you guys would have replies but it just seemed to be you were gentler! Like you guys are friendlier and gentler whereas he would go well what do you think about this and duh, duh, duh, and this, and that sort of stuff. (Linda)

I know tutors are often only one step removed from students themselves; but I know they are not chosen because they just managed to scrape through ... I still do approach it as if there are some people here who know stuff I don't and they have also had a disciplined approach to it which comes with qualifications or whatever and therefore they are the ones who are heading the unit or teaching it even though they say everyone has a valid contribution to make and up to a point that is true and I agree and comments do come up that I find valuable but there is no doubt that I place a higher value on comments coming from a tutor or lecturer. (Graham)

Graham's comment, like Linda's stated need for recognition from Brian, suggests that for them, at least, a considerable degree of authority in the online class is vested in the Team Leader, although Graham also seems to see it clearly in the tutors too.

Secondly, despite being an environment where peer to peer learning through the discussion boards is actively encouraged by tutors as being important, students' own assessment of the knowledge of their peers, as they reported in interview, suggested that other students' knowledge had not particularly changed their own way of thinking. Karli, like many students, appreciated hearing how different people worked in other institutions and felt that about 20% of input to her learning came from peers but that that input did not particularly change her opinions; 'probably not majorly, yeah,

not majorly, no real shifts in direction or belief or anything like that' (**Karli**). Linda was clear that others - but they did not necessarily have to be students, - were necessary in order to question her assumptions about issues. This view was endorsed by Catherine who felt 'as long as I was responded to it didn't matter by who – as long as it wasn't an inane comment' (**Catherine**), although she was worried that classes which had mixed levels of students could be wasting time for learners with more professional experience. On the other hand, Richard, as an honours student felt he had a lot to learn from his peers:

*How much of your learning do you think was influenced directly by them?*

Probably a better percentage because there were concepts that I didn't grasp as quick as I should of because I had my head running around in other subjects, in other courses at the same time and the fact that, as I said, that I could jump on and say I have no idea what that reading meant can someone help me and they could or I even got on at one stage and said I'm, like, I haven't read it can someone break it down for me and I got a heap of points, basically what the guy posted said was this, this and this, that gave me something to work with anyway. I think if I didn't, I don't have it in the print version. I don't have that resource I suppose it is, if I'm flagging behind on the reading, well then I have no idea, that whole segment of the course is missing, so I think that was definitely an advantage to being online, was the fact that if you get caught out or if you don't get time or if you don't understand it you have got someone to step up and explain it to you ... someone might have read between the lines a little bit clearer than I was and just sort of went, did you understand it? No, I missed a table and then when you go back and read it, oh yes, there it is why didn't I pick it up but, yes, definitely having someone to bounce queries off is good, not something that I'd never say I didn't go out to find them, but if I needed it, it was...human being kind of thing. (**Richard**)

Finally, there is the question of authority in relation to the knowledge presented in the form of ideas offered in discussion board messages. Students on the course are encouraged by tutors to use outside authorities to support their arguments in their assignments and to make sure that such authorities are appropriately referenced. The Course Team Leader is careful to support assertions he uses in his messages with references which he adds to the end of messages. The range of other voices he calls on is wide. For example, he uses quotations from a wide diversity of sources and quotes Walt Disney's Pocahontas almost as readily as educational theorists like Paul Hanna, and (Australian) educational bodies like ANTA (Australian National Training Authority). This offers students a reference model for knowledge in this class which is wide ranging and flexible, but few students mirror this particular feature of Brian's messages. Some do use more conventional



sources but, most often, students do not refer to external authorities in their messages in any more complicated a way than to refer to 'in our course readings'.

References to 'we', as a device to position the students in the class as an authority-holding group in their own right are frequent. This device has already been seen in use above in the discussion between Richard, Amy and Margaret. This feature also recurs at the end of the following thread of messages which offers a typical example of the ways in which authority is drawn upon, accorded and acknowledged, or not, in participant messaging:

*Message One*

<b>Subject:</b> reading 1.2
some more thoughts on READING 1.2 JANET
In the study guide it expresses that Resource Based Learning is used interchangeably with the term flexible delivery and that it has an emphasis on resources and media in a mass education setting.
The author of this article states a definition of Resource Based Learning which is utilized in a mass education setting and which is stipulated as university based and that the technology of video conferencing is not a methodology of this process.
A rather ambiguous article starting with the statement "distance education methods are not truly education methods" and that mass education is in the realm of the campus based university. Whereas Flexible Delivery includes methodology such as video conferencing and is presented to the true mass education of real and virtual.
A question then arises how can these two terms be used so interchangeably?

Although Janet appears to take some ownership of this message by placing her name at the top she does not offer any work in support of either of the points of view she elaborates. However, it is implied that the, apparently neutral, question she poses at the end of the message originates from what she sees as ambiguity between two elements of the course material. This question is tentatively framed by the use of "a" rather than "the" in the last line and suggests that there may be two issues here. Firstly, is there even a question to be answered; i.e. has she understood the situation correctly? Secondly, an issue of whether she should/can ask that question in this place. This message could be seen simply as a summary of one student's thinking after studying course material, in which case one may wonder why it is posted to a public discussion board. However, given the response it receives from Belinda, below, it seems it is understood as a question with which to start discussion in this context, albeit indirectly put and hesitantly framed. Belinda's response emphasises the value of the question which Janet has raised as a topic for further discussion. Equally, it serves to reassure any other students that even though Janet's message

might be seen as questioning the position of the tutors (by implying criticism of them for providing ambiguous learning resources for the class), what Janet has done in posting her message is entirely appropriate student behaviour in this class context, and supports an open and flexible cultural model of class interaction.

### Message Two

<b>Subject:</b> Re: reading 1.2
Good question, Janet. What do others think?
Belinda

By responding to Janet, Belinda is also consolidating the position of the tutor as being responsible for encouraging and facilitating interaction. This is recognised by Oscar by means of his reply.

### Message Three

<b>Subject:</b> Re: reading 1.2
Hello Janet and Belinda,
I, personally, think that Johnsons definition is too narrow.
This tutorial from Stauffer Library at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada has an article called: 'What is Resource-Based Learning? It says:
"Two essential features of resource-based learning are its flexibility in terms of adaptability to different learning styles and subject areas, and its promotion of student autonomy."
This seems to bring the definition very close to that of FD.
It continues: "Resource-based learning involves active participation with multiple resources (books, journals, newspapers, multi-media, Web, community, people) where students are motivated to learn about a topic by trying to find information on it in as many ways and places as possible."
This seems to hint more of 'lesson-planning', however.
The difference appears to be merely one of direction: RBL toward the 'learner', FD more toward the 'deliverer'.
You can find the artilce at:
<a href="http://stauffer.queensu.ca/inforef/tutorials/rbl/rblintro.htm">http://stauffer.queensu.ca/inforef/tutorials/rbl/rblintro.htm</a>
Oscar

Having directly addressed Janet and Belinda, Oscar's response begins with a statement making it clear that he does not recognise the view put forward by "Johnson" in one of the course texts. He emphasises his point by using "I *personally*" not just "I". This implies that the position he is taking is strongly felt. Also, that he is hesitant about the level at which he is criticising the view of a figure positioned as an "authority" by the fact that his opinion has been included, and thus implicitly sanctioned by the university, as a part of the course material. Oscar does not continue speaking from his personal position. Instead, he builds his own case by standing back from the alternative he

is suggesting and moving to a reporting position. He is careful too to explain the exact location of the source of the alternative opinion and to be tentative in presenting what the source offers (e.g. 'this seems to...' and 'the difference appears...'). By the end of the message he has neither promoted the alternative opinion nor rejected it but by detailing the exact web location of the article encourages his readers to consult this source for themselves. This again serves to reinforce a norm of open interaction for the class.

Janet receives one other direct response to her comments on 'reading 1.2'. It comes from Jonathan.

#### *Message Four*

<b>Subject:</b> Interconnected vs. Interchangeable
Hi JANET and All,  I would say from what I gather from the readings and from other students comments, that the two terms, "Flexible Delivery\Learning" and "Resource Based Learning" are in many ways interconnected, however, in my opinion shouldn't perhaps be used interchangeably as sometimes seems to be done.  Both perspectives have the key element of Learner Centeredness and empowerment of the learner. Both also open up broader avenues of learning.  I would say that "Flexible Delivery" uses RBL as a tool in the overall scheme of learning effectively. And on the other hand one could say that RBL uses concepts of "Flexible Delivery" in order to achieve it's goal of reaching the learners.  Hope you all are enjoying the material as much as I am. I would be happy for any comments.  Cheers,  Jonathan P.

Whereas Janet did not address her message to anyone in particular Jonathan addresses his both specifically to her and, at the other extreme, adds 'and All'. His message is much less tentative than the previous ones and he uses line spacing to break up the different stages of the position he is presenting. He begins by summarising where he has found evidence for it ('what I gather from the readings and from other students comments...') then, in another paragraph, summarises the critical points of commonality between the two disputed terms ('Both perspectives have the key element of Learner Centeredness and empowerment of the learner. Both also open up broader avenues of learning'). He finishes his message with another paragraph making clear not only his own perspective ('I would say ...') but also what else might be concluded from following his line of argument ('one could say ... RBL uses ... it's ...'). Unlike Janet and Oscar, he offers only a passing mention of any source of authority other than his own deliberations and resulting opinion.

Jonathan's message is in sharp contrast to the other messages because he uses markedly different sources of referential authority.

There is one more message in this thread. It is posted by Oscar - some two weeks after the original messages examined above.

#### *Message Five*

<b>Subject: Re: Interconnected vs. Interchangeable</b>
Hi Jonathan, I agree. I think, by now, we as educators, should NOT mix these terminologies..Flexible Delivery seems to be an established name for education that is offered as a choice to the learner 1. in the institution, 2. in a learning center 3. at a distance and 4. a combination of any of these. That's the name and we should use that name when talking specifics. Oscar

Unlike his previous message, this one from Oscar is addressed very specifically – to Jonathan. It adopts a completely different position too, in light of what he understands as Jonathan's recognition of his view which is no longer, therefore, purely personal. For Oscar, they have now, together, become 'we as educators', who share the views of Oscar as 'I' and who can, and must, state those views with authority. There is no need, his tone suggests, for further discussion.

In summary, there is both confusion over who has authority over knowledge production and management, and apparent agreement that knowledge in the online classroom is held in a variety of places. At times assumptions about the relative value of knowledge follow patterns recognisable from other educational contexts, but there is also evidence of students' interactions with knowledge leading them to position themselves as authorities in their own right - on the basis of their negotiation of different information sources within the class.

#### **7.4.4 Assessment**

All students were required to complete three pieces of assessed work in order to pass the course. Assignment item one was a short reflection on the student's overall understanding of the field and required the reading of set text items (all online readings). Assessment item two was a longer piece which built on the first item and further sequential working through of online materials. The final assessed item required detailing a plan to implement a project in the student's own workplace and, again, completion required use of material in all previous sections of the course. The subject of assessment had its own area within the delivery platform and the link button from the course front

page led to a page with no less than 10 further links, several of which, in turn, led to other links ranging from general advice on assessment completion to specific assignment marking guides which detailed the criteria that would be used by tutors when marking assignments. Additionally, the Course Team posted several related messages to the class via class and group discussion boards. Many of these documents sought to elaborate just how flexible the assessment system was despite consisting of three fixed assignments with very controlled parameters in terms of word length and topic. For example, this message on the main assessment site:

#### **Flexibility of Assignment Due dates**

The due dates for assignments have been set in order to provide a reasonable pacing for study of the course (and also to meet administrative processing needs). However, you, as an adult learner, know your work and time commitments and instructional timetable during the semester. In your situation and in this course, the due dates can only be guidelines.

**If your submission dates will differ by significantly more than two weeks from those stated, you must notify the course team leader of your situation by email proposing dates by which you do plan to complete the assessment items. There is no need to apply for an extension for periods of up to two weeks. You can assume it will be granted and for such a period. Remember, you are responsible for your own learning.**

#### **Note**

This arrangement may not be acceptable or necessary in other courses which you are studying, so familiarise yourself with the policy on assignment due dates in each course in which you are enrolled.

It is followed up by this message on the course front page:

<b>Subject:</b> Assignment Extensions	<b>Posted by</b> Brian on Aug 9, 2002
<p>It is appreciated that coordinating personal, professional and study lives can be quite a challenge in some circumstances. Even the best time management schedule may be subject to unpredictable or unforeseen circumstance. The department of FET at XYZ recognises the potential turbulence of adult life, thus we are considerate of the possible need to negotiate flexible or alternative assignment submission dates. We remind that it is up to each unit participant to contact their specific lecturer or group coordinator (Belinda or Anne) and negotiate extensions beyond the automatic 2 weeks provided. Students must communicate their intentions and situation in order to gain assistance. For people to gain substantial extensions, they must have shown commitment to their progress by completing some of the set work and forwarding a plan of intended completion for consideration and approval. If difficulties arise throughout your studies, please communicate with your course leader.</p>	

The number of pages and words devoted to explaining the assessment system when compared with the limited options of the assessment questions was noted as ironic by some students. Others expressed surprise at the rigidity of the assignments themselves within what was positioned as a flexible environment. There was also confusion over where authority lay in terms of deciding exactly when assignments needed to be completed – tutors were the contact point for extensions beyond two weeks but if you were a student who had begun late, on a principle of flexibility, when

did the automatic two weeks extension come in to play – after the date the University had set for submission if you had begun on time, or after a date adjusted to take account of late arrival? The negotiating parameters were fairly flexible in keeping with the institution's stated principles of learner-centredness, and to a degree on the part of the tutors - who were sustaining the positioning of the course as flexible - but there were occasions on which this flexibility came into conflict with the tutors' need to manage their own workload, especially at the end of the semester when the need to issue transcripts and results to students' sponsors led the University administration to impose deadlines for processing grades.

Assignment one caused most comment since not only were students expected to complete it and submit it via the electronic 'dropbox' system, they were also expected to post a version to the class discussion board for public comment by all other students at the same time as it was submitted for tutor marking. Student reactions to this requirement were varied. Some refused to collaborate and did not post; there were actually no sanctions which could be imposed on them for non-participation in this process. As with some other situations (like general posting of messages to discussion groups) tutors were able to 'actively encourage' what they stated they felt was in students' interest, but they could not enforce, or insist upon, participation. This might be considered as an example of where negotiation failed to evolve a consensus. On the other hand the tutors' failure to attempt to move beyond the position of 'actively encouraging' participation may also be regarded on their part as a pragmatic negotiation away from likely conflict.

Some students saw the assessment process simply as a means to an end. Others were less accepting. For Pamela there was a clear connection between length of assignments and level of study and she reported being disturbed by how little she was supposed to write for some course assessments - once again, her cultural model of how to 'do' study of this kind has been challenged:

I was surprised at the number of small activities I was told, in a masters degree, I was asked to be presenting something that was very short, 500 words, you know, and three of those, to me, I just always worked in major papers, I just don't work in 3 x five hundred words. (Pamela)

Catherine attributes the model, whereby assessment is understood in terms of the number of words designated to a particular assignment, as culturally framed within a particular sector of education:

'coming out of a university background', ... that I find really restrictive, this business of you must write so many words because often you can say what needs to be said in less or it may take you a lot more, having to get it to that many words is a pain in the neck. (Catherine)

For others, like Amy, there is a qualitative aspect to assessment activity. This means it must be related to certain external standards, like the number of references to 'theory' in the submission. The assignment guide for Amy's course stipulates quite clearly 'argument supported with specific examples (readings, references)', and she is disconcerted to see a colleague receiving a high grade for an assignment where 'I swear there was one reference in the whole thing ... I am gauging by the wrong measurement stick obviously' (Amy). Simon relates ideas of what is 'good' assessment to the practices in whichever national education system each student has worked in before:

if you look at the assessment practices of Korea and Japan everything is very much rote learning, automated tests, and automated results, everything is a report card any idea of assessment that doesn't clearly say that you were the best, ... is quite baffling to them for example ... in competency based training you are either competent or you are not yet competent, there is no such thing as not competent so that could be quite confusing for people as an assessment style - they get upset, ... It's too different for them ... things like reflections I think that can be very disconcerting whereas something like a chat room or just a discussion forum would be easier but reflection exercises [*like assignment one*] would be ooh, pretty scary. (Simon)

However, Eleanor seems to have made the transition to the overtly stated norms of interaction in this classroom (in terms of the principles laid out at the start by Brian) when she posts a message to Catherine bemoaning what she sees as a lack of discussion about important course content which needs to be studied before the next assignment:

<b>Subject:</b> Re: What are your thoughts & expectations
I agree that it is hard to hold a discussion when you are the only one "discussing". I expected to see more in the Reflections 1 but so far there is nothing and we are half way to this first assignment. I would love to discuss the readings.

Since, at the end of the day marks achieved in assignments are the only things which determine grading outcomes on this course, the confusion which students and tutors have to negotiate is critical to student success. Confusion in matters of assessment prevails because expectations and understandings (such as those illustrated above) pre-dominate in the students' interpretations of the online classroom above and beyond what they actually see as, or are told will be, the practices

in that classroom. The institution's professed flexibility is in sharp contrast to the rigidity of the assessment system. This sets up a cultural conflict for students.

#### **7.4.5 Summarising authority issues**

Lines of authority in the culture of the online class are unclear. By implication, through its policy of flexibility, the University hands a certain degree of authoritative control over learning and knowledge creation to students. All students do not have to attend the 'same' class at the same time, they do not have to undertake the same activities in order to complete the course successfully and, theoretically at least, authority to create new knowledge as a consequence of discussion and collaboration is in the hands of individual students and their colleagues and not at the disposal of tutors. However, as with others aspects of the 'doing' of this class, there are contradictions:

- collaboratively generated new knowledge can only be validated by the University if it fits into the framework for assessment which has been pre-ordained by the University
- despite being encouraged as an outcome of discussions, for collaborative work to get recognition through assignment grading it must be approved by the Course Team Leader at the very beginning of the course before discussions are fully underway. Since often students will not know each other until discussions begin and they can make any decision about who they might wish to collaborate with, they are seldom in a position to obtain permission for collaborative assignments ahead of time.
- There is a mismatch between student and university over the value to be placed on knowledge generated by students. Tutors repeatedly state how much is to be gained from peer-to-peer exchange whilst students place much higher value on tutor knowledge and, within the tutoring team, they value the Team Leader's knowledge more highly than that of other tutors.

#### **7.5 Contradictions and dilemmas**

Technology, time and questions of authority are felt across everything that happens in the online class. They provide a boundary frame for the cultural environment of the class when they impact on the elements within the online class. Often this impact occurs when the contradictions within ideas of technology, time and authority precipitate a conflict of interest for one element or another and control becomes an issue.



## 7.6 Control

The promise of flexibility and student-centredness which this online class seems to offer to participants is not 'what you want when you want', although the university and the self-positioning of the course often seem to imply this. Control of what happens in the classroom does not lie with the students, but nor is it, as they themselves suggest in their talk, simply constrained by the technology and facilitated by suspension of 'real' time – control rests principally in the hands of the delivery platform, a factor that is largely unrecognised as a constraint by its users. Why don't students identify the delivery platform as the root of many of their difficulties in the online classroom? The implication within their talk in this study is that the delivery platform and the institution are seen as one and same thing and, since students are adept at managing their transition online by using a 'compare and contrast and categorise' strategy (looking at new experiences in the light of old understandings framed by cultural norms from the professional, institutional and disciplinary cultures they are familiar with), asking 'why?' about how the delivery platform does some things would be like asking why the University was teaching them in a classroom. There are several instances in their interviews where students are to be seen rationalising along the lines that 'the institution must know best'. Richard does this when he talks about all the messages posted by Brian (see 6.2.2 above), and Pamela, when talking about her struggle to come to terms with the interaction required of an online student, remarks that one has to assume that certain activities are put there by tutors ('part of me trusts the co-ordinator to put it there for a reason...'), as members of an educational institution, for a purpose. Questioning the authority of the institution does happen in some contexts, as I have discussed above in relation to assessment (see 7.4.4), but not often.

### 7.6.1 The delivery platform

For many online students, the delivery platform features indirectly as an active element in the negotiation of culture in the online classroom - unless they have also tried to teach with it. When the effects of platform design or operation are felt by students these effects are most often attributed in a general, non-specific way to 'technology' as a phenomenon. The platform, by dint of recording all interaction within it, offers the possibility for students, potentially endlessly, to revisit old 'conversations' and a number of those students interviewed reported that they had used this facility not just during the course but also subsequently. Sometimes this was because they had not

had time during the course to read everything and sometimes (Graham, Linda, Pamela) because situations had arisen subsequently in their work which made them want to revisit course readings.

Students' overt awareness of the delivery platform and its norms and assumptions is generally limited to occasions on which they encounter its technical limits – when it fails to deliver the responses they expect or want, and, most often, when it appears to 'lose' messages or post them twice. Few seem to be aware of how the platform structures interaction unless they have tried to teach with the platform. In that case, like Linda, they tend to make comparisons between how the University they are studying in uses it compared to how their own institution uses it, rather than questioning whether or not it is effective, or in anyway exploits or inhibits learning and collaboration in the online class.

In fact, in this study, the platform may arguably even be seen as a significant, distinct but still integral, configuration within the configuration of the class, the key elements being its designers, the institution and the students. The platform, as adapted in the version used by the institution for this course, exerts a considerable influence over the way in which students work. The platform's 'behaviour' and norms are something students and tutors need to take account of but which are generally disregarded or attributed elsewhere. This misattribution begins from the point of student registration, usually well before students get to class. Class lists are set up automatically from registration records which require students to provide their names as on their legal documentation, which is sometimes not the way they are normally known. This is illustrated by an exchange between Eleanor and Catherine,

<b>Current Forum:</b> Rules of Engagement
<b>Date:</b> 06-Aug-2002 00:21:00
<b>Author:</b> Manchester, EY < <a href="mailto:manchester@anywhere.org">manchester@anywhere.org</a> >
<b>Subject:</b> Re: What are your thoughts & expectations
Sorry! Are you Louise or Catherine???

<b>Current Forum:</b> Rules of Engagement
<b>Date:</b> 06-Aug-2002 22:08:00
<b>Author:</b> Smith, Louise < <a href="mailto:catherine.smith@somewhere.net">catherine.smith@somewhere.net</a> >
<b>Subject:</b> Re: What are your thoughts & expectations
I'm Catherine - my parents, being good RCs put Louise first on teh birth certificate but my given name and the name I've always worn as 'me' is catherine. Get's confusing but there you go! Cheers Catherine

Furthermore, once picked out on the class list by the 'wrong' name students have to work exceptionally hard to change it online, as their messages all go out with headers which indicate the name as recorded on the class list unless the student contacts the administration at the University in order to get it changed formally. More frustrating yet is the fact that should the person completing the registration process have used block capitals to complete the original registration, this is transferred online where Internet convention may cause readers to see the capitals as shouting. And, as can be seen above, the name will always be posted with the family name first followed by any or all or none of the student's other names – again dependent on the whim of the person completing the registration screen rather than as a result of any choice or action on the part of the student.

Once the course has formally begun, the delivery platform performance intervenes in interaction in terms of how quickly it makes messages visible, and I have already intimated at 7.3 above how this may impact on users in terms of understanding time online. Most of this activity is hidden to students' once they have understood that their interactions are asynchronous – they expect to see, and do see, messages only when they are logged on, and then, only the ones which the server offers them. Usually this offering will include all messages to date, but not always.

For other students the time taken to display messages deters them from responding to the messages of others or embarking upon new discussions. Some are prepared to take the time to download messages for display on screen at the start of the course when message loads are low, but in later stages of the course they may simply ignore new messages. A facility to view only previously unread messages is offered by the platform to try and offset this difficulty but this only exacerbates matters for those trying to continue an ongoing discussion – if they want to refer back to previous messages in their own new message they have to take the time to display everything in order to see the full thread, so this facility is useless. And once the full thread is downloaded it may only be practicable to select the option to open selected messages if the authors have taken the trouble to amend their message title line to identify a specific theme, otherwise it will be impossible to tell one message from another because the platform will automatically generate every response created by means of clicking the 'reply' button, with the identical heading - 're: (original message title)'.

The knock on effect of platform 'interference' from its own norms and expectations (i.e. those of its designers) is felt at the individual and class levels. For the class, the platform hinders interaction by discouraging lengthy exchanges - because of the time it takes to display a full board, and because of the message threading system used for replies. The platform's assumption that encouraging discussion involves only the process of making unread messages visible fast implies that any single response will only ever refer to any one other previous message. This is both counter intuitive in terms of real time f2f person to person interaction and in terms of developing academic argument and debate. On an individual level this feature makes it hard for participants to discuss in a way that they might recognise as group discussion. If, for example, they post a message as part of an ongoing debate and then wish to add a further thought – something which happens frequently in f2f discussion - there is a very real possibility that any subsequent utterance will neither appear on screen as connected to the original message nor will its time of appearing fit into any sensible place in the ensuing interaction threading. For the group this is confusing; for the individual who is posting the message it is frustrating and potentially harmful since, once the message is seen, the context in which it finally appears may well be inappropriate and the author may end up looking inept. For the diffident or hesitant student there may be loss of face and other unforeseen consequences purely and simply from 'normal' use of discussion boards. This is particularly disturbing because the discussion board facility has been presented to students in the class as asynchronous, and therefore catering especially well for geographically dispersed students because it will allow interaction with pauses for thought and reflection. The fact that the platform only allows responses to single messages is compounded by the threading conventions within the platform and causes conversations to split repeatedly as (historic) time passes; diagrammatically they come to resemble a 'family tree' – see Appendix Eight and discussion at 7.2.2.2 above.

The performance and norms of the delivery platform not only disturb the progression of discussion, they also provoke a number of identity crises for participants. Asynchronous discussion is by definition disjointed but even allowing for students' awareness and expectation of this there are further complications when the way of working of the boards is taken into account. The problems of displaying messages and the lack of inclination by students to do so which results, means that 'conversations' seldom last beyond about 100 messages regardless of how many sub-topics are created. For those participating in conversation within the first messages of any thread there is the possibility of easier exchange of views and a likelihood of response, i.e. of recognition of their

existence and participation in the class. For students who, for what ever reason, either join the board late, or after it has become well stocked with messages, participation is not merely a question of finding an entry point into an ongoing conversation (easier online than off) but also of finding an entry point which will get a response, since the more messages posted the less likely they are to be displayed and read by others and, thus, less likely to be responded to. This discourages discussion between larger groups, gives less opportunity for individual students to gain recognition for themselves or their views and decreases individual visibility. It also deters long term discussions, which in turn discourages the formation of group solidarity. The platform which was posited as offering everyone a voice in fact deprives some of a voice and stifles the voices of some who thought they had found one. Voices which found themselves early on online when they were more easily able to participate in discussion boards lose themselves as the boards become more focused to the topics and assignments of the course because the boards take longer to display. Invisible but even less conducive to supporting all voices is the situation that arises when messages are not displayed at all because the students who might do so have been put off the idea of even attempting to display large boards. Tapering off of participation over the course is quite common in studies of online classes (Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005) but it is exacerbated in this particular case by the practices of the platform and the students' experiences of the platform (see 7.2.2.1 above). Those students who do persist in conversing over time can be seen as forming a group who have learned to minimise some of the delivery platform's more irritating habits. For example, they tend to make extensive use of quotations from each others' messages in their responses. This has the effect of making clear the discussion they are responding to without requiring readers to have to go back and display all messages to date in order to follow the argument. It is a good example of students' negotiating with what seems otherwise to be the non-negotiable.

In summary, the culture of the delivery platform used by the students in this study impacts on their participation and interaction in the class by:

- Disrupting the patterns of interaction with which they are familiar from face to face encounters
- Failing to display, or delaying display of, messages, and thus disrupting turn taking
- The manner in which it threads messages

- The manner in which it auto-titles reply messages
- Providing a 'download unread messages only' function
- Its complicated pathways and processes for message display which increase time required to display whole message threads.

The platform impacts on individual student's interaction because:

- Conversations are stopped prematurely due to slow message display
- Messages, and thus individuals, get ignored by early termination of active threads
- Individuals who are slow to compose replies may get no recognition at all from others
- Individuals lose control of how their replies are posted due to multiple servers, message threading and time delays
- Relationships and trust which build over time are jeopardized
- Students get increasingly discouraged from attempting online participation; the longer the class goes on so topics raised in the later stages of course tend to be discussed by a lower percentage of students, the system favouring those with fast connections and greater patience/time to wait for messages to display.

The most critical dilemma for participants using the delivery platform is that although it is 'fixed' in so far as its ways of doing things (e.g. delivering messages) are repeatedly the same, and might possibly, therefore, be learned and understood procedurally, in practice it will only operate only in conjunction with other elements (e.g. a tutor, or a student, etc.). This means that any knowledge participants acquire about the visible manifestations of its performance are unique to the moment (i.e. the context) in which what they observe is physically happening. There is no easy negotiation to be done with the delivery platform. Success in dealing with it lies in learning how to negotiate around it, getting other elements in the class to compensate for some of its deficiencies.

### **7.6.2 The contradictions of control**

The most crucial contradiction for students in the online cultural context in this study lies with confusion over the relationship between, and thus the division of authority between, the University (as the institution hosting their learning experience) and the platform which that institution has chosen to deliver the learning experience. The institution and the platform are often seen as synonymous but, simultaneously and perversely, the flexibility touted by the institution is contradicted by the inflexibility of the delivery platform. This leads to confusion over issues of authority and, thus, of control. It positions the online class culture as confused and contradictory.

This, in turn, hampers negotiation and ultimately makes class cultural norms unpredictable and difficult for students to deal with. Lessons learned in one class will contribute to dealing with the next class but do not provide a stable framework which will in any reliable, comprehensive or certain way *predict* norms for the next class.

## **7.7 Chapter summary**

In this chapter I continued my exploration of the practice of negotiation of culture in the online class. I discussed four themes which emerged repeatedly across different incidences in data analysis: technology; time; authority and control. Aspects of these themes generated contradictions and uncertainties for participants; this complicated interaction and could render attempts at negotiation ineffective. In Chapter Eight I will relate these findings to the research questions for the study and draw some conclusions.





## Chapter Eight

### Culture online, drawing some conclusions

#### 8.0 Introduction

Under the overarching theme of how culture is implicated in online learning, I set out in this study to examine the nature of culture in a remote-accessed virtual class with learners who had been recruited globally. After a review of relevant literature and of ways of conceptualising culture I refined this overarching theme to provide three research questions:

a) how does construction of online class culture take place and what elements are involved in this activity?

And consequent to that question,

b) how does the constructed nature of online culture impact on students' participation in online education?

c) what are the crucial aspects of online culture that tutors need to take into consideration when teaching online?

In Chapter One I looked at the nature and features of virtual learning environments. I characterised them as being flexible environments where new relations of time could facilitate knowledge construction through textual interaction, and where a range of 'cultural' factors were active in shaping the understandings and expectations of participants. In Chapter Two I examined ideas of culture and, in particular, the difficulties surrounding the use of ideas which equate culture with nationality. I concluded that chapter by suggesting that using such notions in researching culture online was unhelpful as it often led only to comparative accounts based on essentialist principles emphasising dissonance and difference in classes which were nonetheless functional. Instead, I proposed that culture should be regarded as a process of ongoing negotiation between the different elements involved in any particular context. In the online class context, this would involve not only students, tutors and course materials but also the technology being used. In negotiation human elements would draw on understandings they had previously developed through prior experience of other cultures, whilst those understandings on the part of designers would be reflected in the structure and functionality of the technology and the course materials provided for the class. In Chapter Three I looked in detail at previous research studies of relevance to this

study. I noted that whilst much light had been shed on aspects of the online class such as interface design, collaborative learning, etc., there was no overall understanding of the nature or practice of culture there. At the end of the chapter, and in response to this gap, I refined the research questions to focus on the processes of negotiation of culture in the online class. In Chapter Four I discussed how I established a methodological framework based on grounded theory to underpin my investigation and in Chapter Five I discussed the types of data I collected and analysed. In Chapter Six I considered the practice of negotiation of culture. I looked at the process of posting messages and how this served as the primary means by which participants negotiated online class culture. I offered examples of discussions and reviewed what was discussed, how issues were presented, and how and which authorities were drawn upon to validate or dispute positions presented in discussions. I also considered how effective the negotiation process was. In particular, I looked at how one attempt to encourage discussion, on the part of tutors, had met with limited success in facilitating negotiation of norms and expectations for the class. I also considered a message thread (involving three students) which served to illustrate some key characteristics of negotiation in this class. In order to give depth to the picture of cultural negotiation online, in Chapter Seven I developed the core themes of technology, time, authority and control which arose repeatedly across different instances of negotiation. I noted that by introducing contradictions and uncertainties into the negotiation process, and thus potentially impeding its effectiveness, these themes played a crucial part in all negotiation. For example, the technology used to facilitate the class was presented as encouraging interaction but, in practice, it intermittently, and without warning, displaced messages. Furthermore, I noted that aspects of time, technology and authority were inter-related, serving to complicate matters even further, and to raise problems of control for participants. To continue the example, in the case of the displaced messages, users understandably assumed that because the university had chosen the delivery platform the university would have authority and control over it in order to make it function properly; they were unaware of the effect of time which came into play because the system was using four servers that were only updated at intervals. Above all, I found issues of control to be crucial.

In this present Chapter I shall reflect on how what I have discovered in this study relates to existing knowledge of the online class and what it offers in terms of new understanding. In response to the specific research questions which have driven the study, I shall discuss how culture can be characterised in the classes I examined and suggest how culture impacts on students' participation

in the online class. Finally I will make suggestions for how the findings from this study may be taken forward both by practitioner online tutors and by researchers.

## **8.1 An overview of findings: the negotiation of culture in the online class in this study**

In this section I will present an overview of findings from my study by considering each of the research questions in turn.

### **8.1.1 Question a) how does construction of online class culture take place and what elements are involved in this activity?**

Class culture evolves as a result of the negotiation between elements participating in the context which is the class. Evolution is iterative so that as culture emerges it also acts on the negotiation process. Students and tutors are the most obvious elements active in the negotiation of class culture but the materials studied and the technology used to deliver it are also active. All are active players directly or indirectly because their activities are influenced, if not determined, by decisions they (or their creators) are making about the culture in which they are participating, based on past experience. Most active elements negotiate with each other and, in terms of changing their behaviour over time as a result of experience, they also negotiate with themselves. The exception to this is technology which, despite appearing at times to have a will of its own, is actually problematic to other elements because it is *not* self-determining, it is a combination of factors over which no single element can gain control in any consistent way and it cannot therefore learn and develop new positions with time and practice. Key aspects of negotiation are as follows.

#### ***8.1.1.1 Expectations and assumptions***

Students and tutors use expectations and assumptions drawn from their prior experiences of a range of other cultural contexts as the basis for negotiation of online class culture. Ideas and norms from national and ethnic cultural group affiliations figure in the negotiation process but do not entirely determine participants' positions in the negotiating process; they are only one contributing frame of reference. Expectations and assumptions directly drive the things that are said and done online by students and tutors – or not done - whereas in the case of materials and technology, it is chiefly their authors/programmers/designers whose expectations and assumptions are at work. Expectations and assumptions may be more or less useful in assisting participating elements in

their bid to negotiate their way forward. When expectations or assumptions are not fulfilled this may be of little consequence, and may simply result in participants noting a modification to those expectations for future use. At other times the result is a more dramatic loss of, or conflict about, control. Negotiation then becomes essential in order to move forward.

Participants' expectations and assumptions about what 'doing education' involves often predominate in negotiation, perhaps because the students in this study are themselves teachers and educators and operating within a context recognised by participants as being concerned with teaching and learning. Other assumptions arise from affiliations, real or vicariously assumed, that individuals bring to the class and from prevailing discourses, e.g. of the 'flexibility' of online learning. Generally students approached the online class armed with the expectation of finding a place of teaching and learning which would offer them something more than they had experienced in previous learning contexts. They expected it would be more flexible, interesting and exciting than learning they had done before and, of particular interest to those who had felt isolated by previous experience of print-based distance education, there was the added promise of interaction with classmates. These ideas framed students' first attempts to understand the new context and to work within it.

#### *8.1.1.2 Design of the learning environment*

The online learning environment also encourages a focus on expectations and assumptions to do with 'doing education' because it labels practices and functions with familiar terms: 'classroom'; 'tutor'; 'discussion'; 'module', etc. The configuration of what was recognisable to participants as educational was, however, only partly familiar since practices were not the same as in previous learning contexts and new elements were at play within apparently familiar activities. The most notable of these new elements was the delivery platform, which was needed to mediate all interaction. Much of the time the platform successfully did this but its performance could not be guaranteed, and at times it seemed to students to be operating with a will of its own. The unpredictability of the platform's performance made it a very difficult element with which to negotiate and co-construct a shared culture. Not least, this was because often actions which had been successfully undertaken in collaboration with the platform on one occasion simply did not occur successfully on subsequent occasions, despite similar circumstances and actions on the part of users (see sections 7.3.1 & 7.3.2).

Delivery platform design also highlighted incompatibilities between the expectations and assumptions of tutors, designers and students. For example, the tutors and designers of this class expected all students to come online with a willingness to explore the full extent of platform functionality, and then to participate actively in message interaction. This was not the expectation of a number of students. This assumption on the part of tutors became even more crucial when they posted messages that needed to be seen by all students and did so in areas that some students were not seeing. The areas were unseen because students had not found them because, in turn, they had not understood the expectation (on the part of the designers) that students would explore all areas of the platform immediately they logged on for the first time.

#### *8.1.1.3 The dynamics of posting – negotiation by messages*

Negotiation mainly takes place by means of exchanges of messages posted to discussion boards open to all class members. Topics and issues may literally be debated or negotiated on public discussion boards but negotiation manifests itself in more subtle ways too. For example, the language used in some students' messages was seen to change over time in response to the language and ideas used by others in their messages (6.3.2). Also personal pronouns and other words were used in subtly different ways over time, suggesting how students' understandings of themselves and their position in relation knowledge or authority had changed. Negotiation internal to self was reported by some students who in doing this would bring into play norms and expectations from f2f learning, e.g. arguing – to themselves – that if a feature or activity had been put in place by a tutor it must be there for a purpose. According value to what they were being asked to do, students often made decisions based on the traditional "teacher knows best" principle in order to determine how to proceed; authority in negotiation was often accorded in this way (6.3).

Posting messages was essential for members of the class in order to make them visible to others and therefore able to receive the sought-after acknowledgement and confirmation from others that they were a part of this class. However, message posting was a tricky business. Not only were words open to misinterpretation when other cues, that in a f2f situation might offer a guide to meaning, were absent or restricted online, but also the delivery platform could intervene in the interaction process (7.3.1). It might lose the message, fail to deliver it at the time intended or deliver it in an unintended format. Furthermore, the message system within the platform would only allow messages to be sent within the confines of a particular dialogic framework (6.3.5), where a single

author could only ever respond to a single other author, with a single message, and one-to-many messaging was only possible at the very beginning of a new conversation (7.2.2.2). Conversations could go 'missing' or appear in unexpected places. Simply keeping track of conversations was difficult because they sprawled out in a multiplicity of threads. Keeping on track within conversations required the posting of messages which both reiterated what had been said by earlier speakers whilst also moving the discussion forward by being innovative (7.6.1).

#### *8.1.1.4 The significance of technology*

There was no easy way of understanding the performance of the delivery platform, it was unstable and unreliable and its unpredictability had to be negotiated around, time and again. In trying to recreate familiar features of the offline class its design ostensibly cultivated a collaborative environment, but in practice, because of its erratic performance, it actively intervened to discourage collaboration. In fact, negotiation *around* technical constraints formed a very significant part of the process of construction of class culture. Whereas earlier research into the student experience of the online classroom has suggested that platform design might be of significance in how students reacted to, and performed in, an online learning environment, my research suggests that it is not just a matter of design. A grounded theorising methodology enabled me to elaborate the practices of cultural negotiation online and revealed the multifaceted influence of technology in this interaction (7.2.3)

#### **8.1.2 Question b) how does the negotiated construction of online culture impact on students' participation in online education?**

In general in this study, the need for negotiation of online class culture is under-supported by the design assumptions within the delivery platform. The effect of these assumptions is compounded by users' assumptions of how interaction should be done in the class, and by their need (which they do not always understand) to use interaction to establish individual identities for themselves. Furthermore, interaction is framed in a particular way.

##### *8.1.2.1 Interaction is framed on the basis of f2f norms*

The platform used to deliver the classes in this study encouraged participants to view the online class as similar to a f2f one as it used f2f labels for online spaces, features and activities. The cultural assumptions of the platform designers regarding how learning and teaching should be done were very visible in the way that interaction was organised. The design of discussion boards

assumed that the class would be taught principally as one group which might break into sub-groups only occasionally. Another built-in assumption was that conversation threads would both only ever cover one topic, and feature regular turns for a maximum of two people – there was no feature allowing an author to make a single response to previous postings by more than one other person. In fact, in design terms, one-to-many interaction is actively discouraged in this class except in the case where the one in question is embarking on a discussion in a ‘sage on the stage’ model of teaching and learning. Interaction was much more complex than could be understood using a f2f model (6.3) and often students (and tutors) lacked resources for understanding the class as a new and different context. They applied previously held understandings of concepts such as ‘participation’ since what they saw around them in terms of design, and the practices of others, reinforced their perception of the usefulness of those understandings for this context. For example, some would only post messages in response to a direct request from a tutor.

#### *8.1.2.2 Poor or sporadic levels of participation and interaction*

Some previous research has suggested that poor participation levels, and lower than expected quality in the interaction that does occur, may be due to students’ lack of understanding about what is meant by terms like ‘discussion’ (Cook & Jacobs, 2004; Mavor & Trayner, 2003) and ‘collaboration’ (Reynolds, 2004). The diversity of explanations offered by students in my research, when asked about the purpose of online discussions, supports this assertion. Crucially in this study however, it became apparent that students did have ideas of what these terms might involve but the ideas were based on other learning and online contexts, e.g. the Internet as a dating tool, and these were of limited use in this particular class (6.3 & 7.2.2).

Mavor & Trayner’s further assertion that appeals for participation have little meaning when they have no connection to assessment is developed by the findings of my study. When students were asked to post ‘reflection’ assignments to a discussion board for group debate few did so as this not only did not help them to achieve good assessment grades – they were asked to post their reflections at the same time as submitting them for grading (7.4.4) – but also to many there seemed potentially to be a lot to lose if what they posted was perceived by others as inadequate, or received adverse comment.

Posting messages is the students' way of creating an identity for themselves (Mavor & Trayner, 2003; Hewling, 2002) and a number of participants in my study identified how stressful the messaging process was. Indeed, one reported worrying about his messages even after he had posted them which, in turn, he had only done after working and reworking them to be sure he was saying exactly what he wanted to say (see 6.3.3 for discussion and examples).

Participation was constrained by it being hard work, not simply because it required putting into text all thoughts (Mann 2002), but it was also hard work because of the design of the message system (how it organised turn taking, for example) and the unpredictability of technology inputs (because the University was using four servers). Herring (1999) has noted that there is considerable interactional incoherence online as a result of the way in which discussion tools present comments and turns on screen. But, although my research shows that message threading is disruptive (which leads to threads, and thus conversations, being split, and thus discourages group interaction), 'facilitating tracking and linking of logically connected turns', as Herring suggests (p.19 of 25), would go only part way to easing the problem as long as other aspects of technology remained unpredictable. In contrast to Herring, who sees new interactional patterns in CMC interaction as liberating and something which users can accustom themselves to, participants in my study were frustrated in their attempts to develop or get used to new interactional norms because each time they thought they had learned the rules, the rules would seem to change again because the same action on the student's part did not necessarily produce the same result each time (7.2.3).

#### *8.1.2.3 Uncertainty and feelings of insecurity about participation*

The call upon tradition that I have referred to in 8.1.2.1 also applied to how authority was approached and understood. In the case of interaction, this meant that even if participants did not feel it was essential for their messages to be responded to by tutors (although some did), they valued such replies more than those from peers (7.4.2). This finding elaborates on research undertaken by Clouder & Deepwell (2004); McConnell, (2006) & Brown (2001) regarding the extent to which students did, or more often did not, value the ideas of peers; and it makes clear that this situation is impacted by the norms from other learning contexts on which students draw in this class.



In common with data found in previous research (e.g. Kanuka & Anderson, 1998) there was little evidence in the data I examined of interaction reaching higher levels of knowledge construction. This did not seem to be a purpose of interaction as perceived by any of the participants (7.2.2). Messages tended to be direct one-to-one question/response/next question, the message threading scheme discouraged deeper debate by tending to split discussion threads again and again (6.3.5.2). Mostly, interaction was about getting answers to questions that students had about understanding course materials. Alternatively, interaction provided insights into how others solved workplace-related problems at a level of general interest.

Furthermore, for some, there is deep anxiety about participation online because words remain visible in a way they do not f2f. Concerns about loss of face (e.g. Clouder & Deepwell, 2004; Mann, 2000; Brown, 2001) were not only expressed by participants but were visible in the face-saving messages they would post in response to the effects of the delivery platform. Humour was also seen as potentially problematic, an issue previously identified by Cramphorn (2004). As far as 'lurking' was concerned, I found little suggestion of 'freeloading' (Salmon, 2000) and much more evidence of technical and access problems, as well as clear indications that for some lurking was simply a preferred way of learning which is best understood as mirroring the behaviour of a f2f student who is 'the quiet one in the corner'. Overall, however, the unpredictability of the delivery platform was crucial in serving to reinforce feelings of insecurity about participation since it could distort even the most carefully crafted contribution.

### **8.1.3 Question c) what are the critical aspects of online culture that tutors need to take into consideration when teaching online?**

In this section I will consider only which are critical aspects. Suggestions for dealing with them will follow in 8.2 below. Participation is critical because it must be regular and active, and this is frequently in conflict with students' expectations of how online learning will be. Negotiation requires students to interact with other elements in the class and, as I have discussed above, this is not always either easy or possible in ways that meet students' (or other participants') expectations. The negotiated nature of culture in the online class prioritises active participation in interaction and collaboration with others. This is in conflict with the discourse of flexibility (i.e. anytime, anywhere, anyone, anyhow) promulgated by the university and anticipated by many of the students.

At the same time as participants are bringing expectations into the online class, by being part of the daily practice of wider discourses of 'e-learning', 'online education', etc. the class raises expectations of its own; most particularly the expectation that it can facilitate collaboration and interaction across time and space. These can happen – but they are frequently interfered with by the performance of technology. The attention of tutors is required to make sure that technology both has a minimal effect, and is understood by participants for what it is, in order to avoid a situation in which participants believe it is their incompetence at communicating which is to blame when things go wrong. By requiring interaction with the many elements at play, the negotiated environment is far from being flexible and inevitably emphasises the power of the elements that cannot evolve and change position through negotiation (like technology). It thus removes control from students, rather than offering them the greater power they expect in what they anticipate will be a more flexible environment.

Visibility is critical too, and achieved by means of active participation in class activity. Until class elements, especially students, become active in the online classroom by becoming visible (i.e. by posting messages), negotiation for the benefit of the class as a whole cannot begin in any consistent way. Until wider negotiation begins the expectations of other elements (i.e. platform; tutors etc.) in the context (i.e. the class) cannot be seen by students and thus they cannot know where difference, and therefore potential conflict, lies. Individuals can begin a negotiation process within themselves as they encounter different aspects of the class, and can change behaviour or thinking in relation to what they are seeing as they move online, but development of the class culture will begin only as wider interaction develops. Equally, students' have to reposition themselves to assimilate an understanding that any words they use will be used by others to make an assessment of them and their position on any issue; an ironic or joking tone used in this process will generally not be heard as such.

Likewise, the situation whereby some students never reach the wider class (i.e. the active interaction that they need) can arise very easily – such interaction did not benefit a number of students in this study because they never got as far as taking part in it. This failure to participate was due to a mismatch between expectations and practice (such as happened with Pamela – see 6.2.4.4). The potential for such a mismatch is one of the most crucial aspects of online culture and arises from differences in expectations and assumptions which have not been predicted or

anticipated by other elements in the online class configuration. In particular the need for *active* participation from students is greater than knowledge of any other learning context might lead them to suppose.

And, most importantly, as my deconstruction of essentialist views of culture (Chapter Two) and use of a grounded theorising methodology (Chapter Four) has allowed to emerge in this study, expectations and assumptions - which derive from a variety of past experiences and identification with a range of different cultural contexts - impact on *all* in the online class, not simply those who are in some way nationally or ethnically marked. These cultural understandings are not fixed but develop and change as part of the evolving process of negotiation. Culture is a process of creation in which various inputs serve to develop a new and constantly evolving environment.

## **8.2 Facilitating the development of online class culture**

The importance of active message interaction on the part of all participants in the online class which I found in the course of this study implies that in order to facilitate the development of class culture a particular effort is required on the part of tutors to ensure that all students make it online on time. Furthermore, once online participants must be assisted to quickly develop the knowledge and confidence to remain there and interact. Likewise, there is a requirement that they understand what is meant in this environment by interaction, and that the practice of negotiation is understood and embraced by all. Participants, students and tutors, arrive online with so much prior knowledge that it becomes difficult for them to reconcile that abundance of knowledge with the position of what can only be described as 'practical ignorance' in which they find themselves. The themes detailed in Chapter Seven form a guiding frame for the most important topics that need to be attended to in order to ensure that participants fine tune their knowledge and develop justified self-confidence. Information about practices online needs to be communicated explicitly to learners in order to support the processes and work of identity construction which is key to successful online learning. Particular suggestions are as follows.

*Technology* – some kind of orientation is needed to show participants how technical features of the platform operate in practice, and to illustrate the reality of terms like 'flexibility', making explicit the relation between technical and cultural dimensions. Interaction can be modelled, and samples shown of message threading patterns. The design assumption that students coming online will

explore all aspects of their new environment could be tackled either by modifying the platform or, preferably, by providing very explicit instructions about how to go about this task and building acquiring knowledge from endeavours to do so, into the learning activities for the earliest days of the class. Some kind of glossary of shortcuts and hints and tips may need to be prepared - by those who are familiar with how the system works for students – which is not the same as for those with a tutor's view of the screen, and access to it needs to be made available from the very first point of arrival online.

*Time* – modelling interaction will illustrate the practice of asynchronous interaction, but there is also a need to make clear to students before they get online just exactly what flexibility and 'anytime, anywhere' mean in practice when the university, and thus the class, are still bound by the day-to-day realities of historical time. Students need to know that flexibility still means that some assignments will be need to be done to fixed deadlines, and that sometimes the internal logic and structure of the subject matter might impose a particular structure to certain activities. At some point there needs also to be an explicit negotiation of the general limits of negotiation. The impact, and lack of impact, of the 'code of conduct' negotiation in this class demonstrates that the time and online location of this discussion will affect its chances of success (6.3.4).

*Authority* – lines of authority were complex in the class in this study, and made more difficult for participants to clarify because information was to be found in so many different locations; the relationships between different elements and authorities were not clear. To facilitate the negotiation of class culture there is a need to open up discussion of where (and in whom) authority is vested for different topics, and thus distinguish the boundary limits for happenings like assignment submission dates, expectations for referencing, etc.

*Control* – making the boundaries of authority clearer assists with issues of control for participants since it enables them to know where to look for help when control is at stake or seems lost. Making students in the class in this study aware of how control seems at times to be seized by the delivery platform, and where authority might lie for doing something about resulting problems, would have helped less confident participants and encouraged them to keep on sending messages even after some had gone astray, etc. This in turn would have encouraged interaction and the negotiation and evolution of class culture.

It is the identification of expectations (on the part of all participating elements) which is of prime importance in understanding the problem issues in this study. And, moreover, the identification of expectations that are the actual expectations, rather than those that are expected to be the expectations. In other words, there is a tension between what tutors and students assume that their students and tutors will be assuming, and what they are actually assuming. Unravelling this puzzle will help open these expectations up for negotiation. This will enable individuals' contradictions and conflicts to be brought to light, debated and resolved, or, at least will help individuals to take an informed position on debates even if conflict does not get resolved.

### **8.3 What is the significance of these findings?**

By approaching the online class from the viewpoint that culture is a matter of ongoing negotiation I have been able in this study to illustrate the richness of the processes involved and the diversity of elements at work in that negotiation. I was able to provide new insights into the role of the delivery platform, what Thorne (2003) refers to as a 'cultural artefact'; that is, a 'tool' through which other cultural inputs, expectations and assumptions derived from institutional, professional, national and other cultural contexts are mediated. However, far from being either culturally neutral or shaping activity in any one particular direction, (see discussion at 1.4.1.1 & 1.4.1.2 above), and far from being simply a tool I was able to illustrate how

- *the delivery platform plays an active part in cultural negotiation*
  - this is not because it has free will but because no single other element has control over what the platform does. This lack of control makes it appear to other players in the class as if the platform has a mind of its own
- *platform performance thus effects how control can be understood in the online class.*
  - I noted above (7.5) that there is frequently confusion in the minds of the students over the authority relationship between the university and the delivery platform. There is good reason for students to see them as synonymous – the university has, after all, chosen the platform to deliver its courses; it is the online public face of the university. However, in the way in which the platform is configured and, consequently, in the way it interacts with other elements within the class, it is most usefully seen as being a separate, and often uncontrollable, force in its own right. This is not because it is disconnected from the university's control but because it can only function with the collaboration of multiple inputs,

the combination of which is a) variable and b) beyond the control of any other single element present in the class. Some of the disruptive effects of the delivery platform could be removed if the university were able to function with only one server, however, even if this change was made, there still remain other elements impacting on the ability of the delivery platform to deliver: e.g. students' geographic location; ISP provision for every participant; hardware access for every participant, etc., which in some way impinge on the platform's ability to deliver activity consistently. These conspire to make the platform a disruptive player in the culture of the online classroom

- *interface design issues are more widely implicated in the student experience online than can be dealt with by versioning or local adaptation of interfaces using criteria like nationality*

- I noted in Chapter Three how much previous research on cultural issues relating to the online classroom had been done in relation to interface design and the affordances which that design offered, or not. That research was premised on assumptions about students' preferences being related to their national cultural background but analysis of the data in this study enabled the emergence of a more complex role for these assumptions in explaining culture in the online class. The new role suggests, somewhat ironically, that interface design issues are indeed implicated in the student experience of culture in the online class but that they are implicated for all students online (not just those from nationalities other than that of the country hosting the class). The most crucial of these issues is,

- *the way that messages are managed and threaded by the platform*

- this introduces uncertainty into communication on line and interrupts interaction by forcing it into a threaded format which serves to deter collaborative activity. This is further complicated by the effect of the delivery platform not offering a facility to post a reply to more than one message with a single shared reply (and thus not break up conversations) is a deterrent to group interaction. Its effect is compounded by the issues of control noted above.

The cumulative significance of these findings is to suggest that negotiating an understanding of class culture must be seen as iterative and only partially cumulative. It is not a definitive process; knowledge of the culture of the class (of any class) is situated and context-bound. In the case of later classes, past experience of negotiation of culture in previous classes provides a foundation for further development, but it does not provide a definitive model for how the culture of a new class will evolve.

#### **8.4 A note on the effectiveness of the research methodology**

Adopting a perspective on culture which saw it as a process of ongoing negotiation between all elements involved in the online class was very effective in breaking with the 'compare and contrast nationalities' approach to previous research on culture in online education. It was especially useful because classes comprised individuals from multiple national and ethnic backgrounds. The process of grounded theorising added to the effectiveness of this approach by deconstructing data and exposing the multiple threads within the practice of negotiation of culture online.

Using data from more than one delivery of the same class gave the study a longitudinal aspect and detecting repeat occurrences of negotiating processes added validity to findings. Using data from classes with which I had been associated both as a student and as a tutor was significant in this study. It meant that I had reserves of personal knowledge on which to draw during data analysis, albeit tinged with the effect of time passing, and more importantly, gave me the credibility to query events, and insider advantage to use to locate additional information. My practitioner focus also ensured that the study has practical outcomes which will in turn ensure that new knowledge from the study is absorbed speedily back into practice. Indeed some findings from the study have already been published.

On the other hand, this is a small and selective study whose generalisability is limited. Some features of the VLE in this study are not universal and although I argue, for example, that the role of technology is of prime importance, it is also true that a factor contributing to the effect of technology was the university's use of four servers, which is not necessarily a common practice in VLEs.

## 8.5 Summarising a participant's view of online culture

Online culture evolves over time through the interaction of elements within a particular class. This interaction does not provide a definitive model of online class culture which can be widely generalised but, rather, it is a fluid working model which continues to evolve as time passes. Lessons learned in one class will serve as potential material for a position from which to negotiate in the next class but will not model how that next class will evolve. Ideas drawn from national culture will form a part of the negotiation resources used by participants but will not determine or predict the direction or outcome of any part of the negotiation. There is no question of online culture being learned as a fixed set of attributes, nor of some kind of assimilation into online classes taking place once a participant has overcome some kind of culture shock (see Fig 8.1 below). Instead there is an iterative process going on over time as interaction between elements in a class takes place and those elements evolve new understandings. I have made a first attempt at modelling this process in Figure 8.2; further research with other online classes is needed to test this model before any attempt is made to try to develop it into theory. The overall negotiation process seems to pass through phases for individual participants – I am proposing in Figure 8.2 that these phases should be described as ‘assumptions’, ‘awareness’, ‘adjustment’ and ‘confidence’, and that within this overall process there are sub-processes which I am describing as ‘negotiation incidents’. These incidents may be triggered when participants’ expectations encounter others and they become aware of difference. Processes of sensitisation and realignment follow in an ‘adjustment’ phase until reconciliation is reached and empowerment and self-actualisation occur in a phase of ‘confidence’ - a (necessarily) temporary resolution of the negotiation incident is reached and the individual moves on to further negotiation. There is linear development and evolution of culture in the sense that historic time is passing as interaction takes place, but interactions with different elements participating in the class do not have to arise in a fixed order. New understandings are negotiated as a co-construction process, not because old rules are being replaced by new ones. Figure 8.2 provides a visualisation of the processes involved in the ongoing negotiation. It is important to note, however, that this is not a prescriptive diagram; different participants will have different needs and will thus spend more or less time on interaction and co-construction at different points in the ongoing, iterative and evolving process. They can also encounter negotiation points in any order and any number of times. But, as time passes and experience of online culture develops, they are likely to spend less time adjusting, repositioning and realigning themselves.

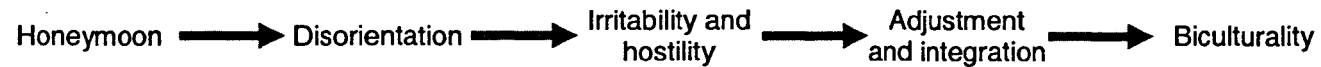




## 8.5 Summarising a participant's view of online class culture - continued

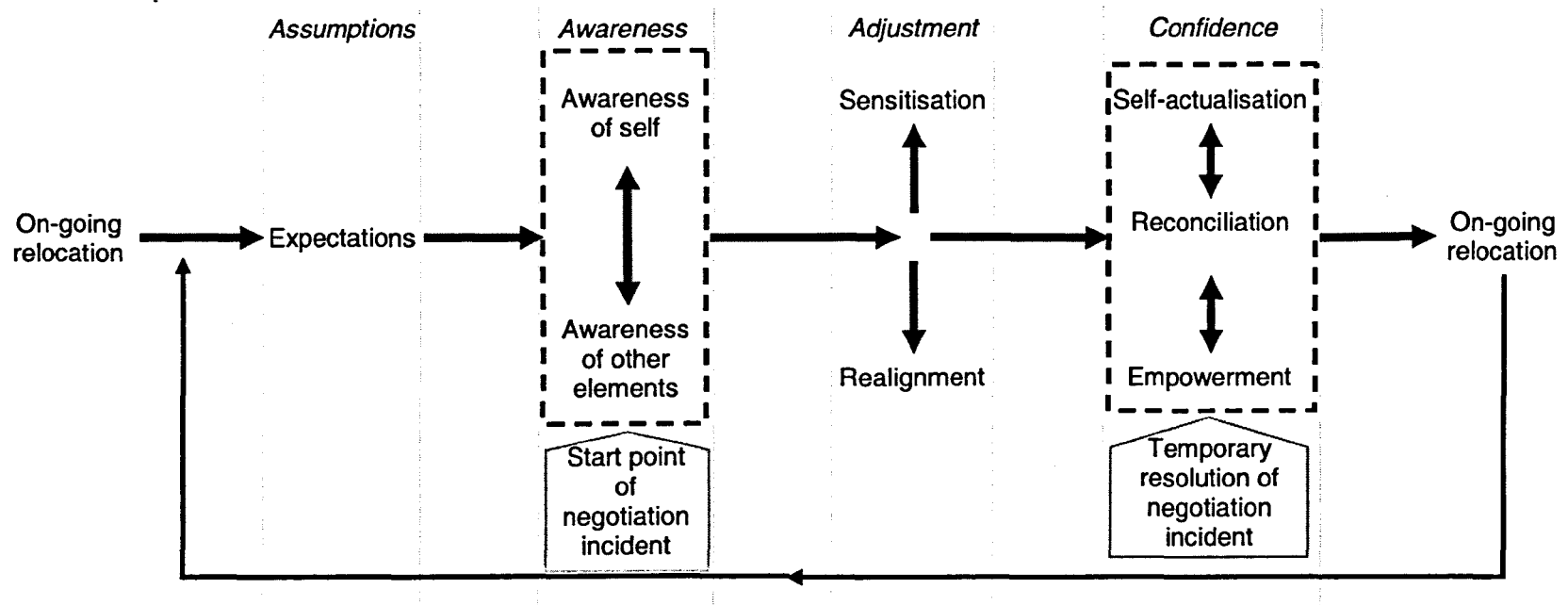
In this study culture online is not a matter of a fixed linear process as suggested, for example by Hofstede et al. (2002) and as illustrated below

*Culture Shock Model (Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede, 2002):*



**Fig 8.1** Dealing with a new culture where culture is seen as a stable end state into which newcomers must be enculturated and once enculturated will be fully and completely integrated.

But, rather, it is an iterative process:



**Fig 8.2** Dealing with a new cultural context where culture is seen as multiple incidents of negotiation within a bigger overall process of ongoing negotiation cycling through phases of assumption, awareness, adjustment and confidence.

## 8.6 Moving on – further research

This is a small study, with participants drawn from one course based in one university, and thus the generalisability of its outcomes is limited. However, the study does suggest that there is value in adopting an approach to culture which views it as a process of ongoing negotiation - and, value in adopting a 'culture' perspective to the workings of an online class and to thinking in this way about online learning in general. Further case studies are needed across disciplines and levels in order to develop finer grained and more robust explanation. Such studies could ideally be undertaken across a number of classes within one institution, or across one discipline but using classes from different institutions. The fact that many of this study's outcomes related very specifically to factors associated with the use of a particular delivery platform suggests that it would be of interest to compare classes taught with different platforms to see if this had any significant impact on the negotiation of culture. The student experiences associated with the four server effect imply that platform functionalities could be critical; studies could usefully be made of contexts which were not dependent on multiple servers.

The significance of the many aspects of technology in online culture which I have shown in this study would lend itself to further exploration by reference to actor network theory. This begins from the premise that in any network (in this case the group of elements that make up the online class) human and mechanical elements should not be distinguished in terms of being active players, but all 'may be regarded, in different ways, as actors – entities that can act (or fail to act) to support the network as a whole' (Cornford and Pollock, 2002, p.174). All elements are participants in maintaining the functioning of the network such that 'any of the elements in the network might cause the breakdown ... In short all these elements have to work together' (ibid. p.175). From an actor network perspective, looking at the critical theme of control that I identified in my study might unpick and illuminate the conflict between the idea of flexibility – and thus personal control over learning - which inhabits many aspects of online learning, and the actual loss of control as reportedly experienced by some students.

Applying techniques from discourse analysis to messages posted to discussion forums is a little practiced technique which was productive in this study and which could be further developed in order to reveal more about cultural negotiation online. I have already developed a starting position for further development of this technique (Hewling, 2005). Techniques which focus on positioning

and on distinguishing power and agency are important for understanding the effect of prevailing discourses of flexibility and inclusiveness as well as that of lifelong learning.

Replicating this study on a bigger scale would require increased researcher time and resources and might not provide a great deal more in terms of other themes or aspects. Width of data collection, i.e. across different courses or institutions would be more useful than collecting more data of the same kind from the same institution, since in my study coding reached saturation point after the analysis of relatively small numbers of messages/interview transcripts. A study which looked at both information about student expectations and assumptions and messaging data from the same students taken from across a number of disciplines in the same institution would be of particular interest. It would allow the possible effect of disciplinary differences to be seen – such differences, if there were any, had little chance of emerging from my study because participants were all educationalists, studying education in an education context. A study of education students in a different context where the researcher had not been both tutor and student would also be of interest in clarifying just how far (if at all) this study was influenced by my own experiences of learning and teaching in online classes.

Developing the draft model (Figure 8,2) would be productive and might involve direct attention to students' opinions, and feelings at different points, and when faced with specific tasks (e.g. assessment, posting messages, downloading discussion boards etc.)

Finally, I have suggested elsewhere (Hewling, 2006) that the techniques that I used in this study could be adapted by individual facilitators of online classes in order to help them consider the process of the negotiation of culture in their own classes. I feel this has potential for contributing to the ongoing professional development of online facilitators for whom there are presently few training opportunities and little supporting theory on how to improve online facilitation. Increased use of online classes in wholly online and blended programmes with participants drawn globally will increase the importance of understanding the negotiation of culture in the online class.



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## Appendix One

### Letter to Semester Two participants asking for permission to use existing data

Dear

I hope your studies have progressed well since we were last in touch. To those of you who have completed, I hope our work in XXX is proving useful in practice.

You will be wondering why I am writing to you now. You will doubtless recall that as well as tutoring I am undertaking research for a PhD at The Open University in the UK; it is as a result of this research and our joint involvement in XXX in Sem2, 2002, that I am contacting you now - with (*name of team leader*) approval - to ask for your assistance. My research is looking at the 'lived' experience of being a student in an online classroom without any face-to-face study component. In order to focus my study I would like to look in depth at how we used the XXX web space during Semester Two 2002 when you were a participant on the course.

Obviously, as a tutor, I am able to access the site freely but I should wish to have your active agreement and support to actually do so since messages posted there were posted for the purpose of the course and not for research. Not surprisingly, XXX ethical guidelines also require that such permission must be sought in order to receive their approval to use this material for research. And, not only that I seek your permission, but that I present evidence to (*name of team leader*) (as the XXX Course Team Leader), that I have consulted you and the nature of your response.

In order that you may make an informed decision I hope the following points will explain the nature and extent of the permission I am seeking:

1. I will be looking at log-ins to the XXX website and the messages we posted there. This is in order to review our interaction with the course website and with each other. In particular, I shall be looking at which parts of the site we used; the numbers and kinds of messages we posted; who we 'talked' to; how much 'talking' we did etc.
2. I will only be looking at this interaction in general terms (i.e. not relating responses to named individuals), no real names will be used and any analysis will be used only for the purposes of my PhD research. All details will be kept in an anonymous format.
3. I will not be looking at any assignments or grades or individual performance details or assessed work details and no attempt will be made to in anyway connect messages to performance on the course.
4. Material on the website produced by anyone who does not wish to have their material used in this project will not be downloaded or used in the project.
5. This research is not being undertaken by or for XXX. Participation in this project is voluntary and in no way affects your XXX study programme or results.

The theory of online education is that it can offer a collaborative, constructivist and co-operative learning environment, the aim of my research is to investigate how this translates into actual lived experience for globally recruited students from a variety of backgrounds. If you wish to ask questions about the research or any aspect of this request please e-mail me at the address below.

I hope very much that you will feel able to agree to let me have access to XXX, Sem., 2002. Please indicate your response by 'cutting and pasting' the section below into a reply message, amending it as necessary and sending it to me at my OU address: [a.hewling@open.ac.uk](mailto:a.hewling@open.ac.uk) Your assistance is greatly appreciated.

Once I have had a chance to look at this data I would also like to interview (online, via e-mail, or by 'phone) some of the participants on this course to explore further how they experience the lived reality of online learning. If you would be interested in participating in such an interview please also indicate this in your reply.

\*\*\*\*\*

This message is to confirm that I....., participant on XXX during Semester Two of 2002, have given/not given (delete as appropriate) permission for Anne Hewling to examine the material which I placed on the course website during the period July-November 2002 for the purposes of her PhD research project. I understand that all data used will be made anonymous and used only by Anne Hewling for the purposes of her research. I confirm that this permission is offered voluntarily on a personal basis and that the research has no bearing on my studies with USQ.

I would/would not be interested in participating in a further interview as part of this research study.

Name:

Date:

\*\*\*\*\*

Again, many thanks for your time and co-operation, I look forward to hearing from you. With all best wishes,

Anne Hewling  
03/07/2003



## Appendix Two

### Jonathan macro analysis

BOARD	DATE POSTED	MESSAGE EXTRACT
Dialogical Dance	15/11/02 0046	<p>In response to the role of the leader to "put out fires", I would have to say that some fires are good and some are bad. Some fires cause more discussion and more brainstorming. Such fires are like positive energy. It's my opinion that we all are here with a professional approach and thus should not play with matches that will make "bad fires". If it does happen however, I would say that we should all work together to put out the fires perhaps. At times however we may be able to redirect the wind on the fire as it were, to cause positive outcomes.</p> <p>Regarding the course leader's role to "direct", I would have to say that direct could also be taken two ways. Perhaps "monitor" and "enlighten learning desire" would be better terms here.</p> <p>Finally, as far as preventing any of us from running off "half cocked", I believe that this situation should not occur. If we all study the materials given to us, put our minds to work, ask where we don't understand, and communicate our ideas and perceptions with our online classmates, then there will be no "half cocked" guns. If they do occur however, then perhaps the "smoking gun" will be the fact that someone didn't try their best to do those things that are mentioned above.</p> <p>Sorry if this response is to long.</p> <p>Best regards, Jonathan</p>
	15/11/02 0111	<p>I would much rather say, "when shouldn't we make a post?". I really believe that this method is so constructive. In my workplace we often communicate via e-mail our new ideas and creative thoughts. We meet once every two weeks to discuss openly as well.</p> <p>I believe that we should all come to each forum with the understanding that when comments are made, they are not being made positively or negatively about anyone as a person, but rather are made in attempt to further develop all of our understandings and ideas. Having said that we will, I hope try to also be somewhat tactful in what we say concerning other peoples comments. Also, at least a little thought should be put into each submission.</p> <p>In conclusion, I believe discussion forums can really enhance our grasp on the course materials and stimulate new ways of thinking as well.</p> <p>Thanks, Jonathan P.</p>

**Comment:** No intro. Not addressed

**Comment:** His assumption

**Comment:** Class = team i.e. unified whole

**Comment:** This is what a professional approach means, what professionals will do

**Comment:** What would constitute too long? How does he know? Who/what has set the 'norm'?

**Comment:** Close is classic letter style - is this in response to others or simply as he does not know any other style to use?

**Comment:** No address

**Comment:** Using out of class/known context to interpret this context

**Comment:** Considers this as a 'formal case presentation'? so this reflects his ideas of appropriate academic literacy?

**Comment:** ? why?

## Appendix Two

### Jonathan macro analysis

Dialogical Dance	15/11/02 0137	<p>This is my first time in an online class situation, so I must admit I'm not familiar with everything yet. I will do my best to get acquainted with it quickly though.</p> <p>I think that the course leader's role in the forums will not be like that of a driver taking me down a path wherever he wishes, but rather like a lantern. I think he will let us see what may be on the path and what bends may occur. We as the students however, must try to discern which side of the path is best to walk on, and which forks in the road to take, and how fast to run or slow to crawl on the path. If we keep our eyes open and minds concentrated on the ideas in each forum, then use the light from our leader as well as his teaching partners to make us more aware of what are important matters for discussion and what are not important.</p> <p>Thanks, Jonathan P.</p>	<p><b>Comment:</b> What constitutes 'everything'?</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> Still positioning tutors as ultimate 'knowers'</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> ?why?</p>
Dialogical Dance	16/11/02 2331	<p>As I read the module, I saw how there has been great debate over whether to use the term "flexible learning" or "flexible delivery". It is refreshing to see that this course will go past that debate and focus on results.</p> <p>It seems that terms often get in the way, as in our earlier discussion regarding "direct". I feel that often people have the same ideas, but get bogged down by a difference in which way they wish to express their ideas, when in fact they have the same underlying principles in their opinions.</p> <p>An interesting part of what Johnson said was that "Open learning" as a term has been wrongly used and only thought to entail access and technology, when in fact of course it entails much more.</p> <p>What I found most interesting is that it seems perhaps policy makers use terms(often improperly) as they wish, to achieve low cost and keep the status quo of the educational system, and on the other side of the deal the quality of education suffers and so does the learner's wallet for that matter.</p> <p>Hope someone wishes to comment on my entry. Comments are nice, but I don't take offence if there aren't any either.</p> <p>Thanks, Jonathan</p>	<p><b>Comment:</b> taking possession but without addressing anyone</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> personalises for self. Wants others to comment but has not addressed message to anyone as such</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> ? why?</p>

## Appendix Two

### Jonathan macro analysis

Dialogical Dance	17/11/02 0410	<p>I guess my point earlier was well taken that not all fires are bad and need putting out.</p> <p>I totally agree with Janet, that this atmosphere of being able to discuss the course together is a very positive environment. Not only for us to share each others opinions, but perhaps brainstorm and come up with new innovations for "flexible delivery".</p> <p>I am enjoying hearing the personal experiences everyone has had with "flexible delivery" or "learner-centred education". Also, I'm enjoying comments and questions posed by our instructors.</p>	<p>Comment: This hasn't been said so he needs to check it out? He isn't getting feedback he needs?</p>
Dialogical Dance	17/11/02 0433	<p>Hi Belinda and All,</p> <p>Yes, I would totally agree that the discussion board is a very unique means of communication. Although it lacks the warmth a smile can give at times, it has it's own kind of warmth. I would have to say that in some ways it is better than "face to face". I say this in light of the facts you stated regarding us being able to reflect, rethink, and edit our words. In "f2f" to we often blurt out words before having a chance to think them through properly. In other situations we say things in "f2f" that we could much better express if they could be said in writing. And finally, we have a chance to say those things that we would normally forget or not have the nerve to say in "f2f".</p> <p>At any rate I agreed greatly with what you said Belinda, and think that it would help all of our perspectives, if we viewed the discussion board in that light.</p> <p>Jonathan</p>	<p>Comment: Who is he talking to?</p> <p>Comment: No top, no bottom – part of the process of adaptation?</p> <p>Comment: First instance of use of any kind of addressivity</p>
Dialogical Dance	19/11/02 1644	<p>Thanks!</p> <p>I'm not used to calling instructors by first names, so I just started this by saying "Thanks". Anyway, thanks a lot for your comment, and I'm glad that you took interest in my point.</p> <p>I'm enjoying the input you and the other instructors are giving, and also the various opinions of my online classmates. It is a great experience thus far.</p> <p>Jonathan P.</p>	<p>Comment: But why, given that he has now learned – as evidenced by message above – this is the norm, doesn't he actually use those names??</p> <p>Comment: Is this yet another case of the influence of external culture? i.e. politeness etc?</p>
Dialogical Dance	22/11/02 0258	<p>Our instructor has made a good suggestion in my opinion. I think the idea of synchronous chat is great! I'm all for doing it, but I think perhaps we should list some points for discussion in advance (could make it more productive possibly).</p> <p>Any other comments?</p> <p>Jonathan P.</p>	<p>Comment: 'thanks' has disappeared but 'P' is back though no other Jonathan that he can be confused with</p> <p>Comment: As above – why can't he name this person?</p> <p>Comment: Who is this addressed to? Could be AH, could be the rest of class</p>

## Appendix Two

### Jonathan macro analysis

Dialogical Dance	25/11/02  1549	<p>Hello and Welcome to a new week,</p> <p>I suppose you're right. Perhaps it would be a success if we are able to get together for a chat at the same time. I'll make a posting in the other forum to see who wants to get together for such a chat(as I think many have possibly stopped looking so much at this discussion board.</p> <p>If you wish I could try to coordinate the timing. Would you or any instructor have time to Join us? If so what would be the best time for you?</p> <p>I'd say that one possible topic could be our feelings on how each various form of media or delivery may or may not be conducive to the enhancement of learning. Another possible one could be positive methods that could be used to persuade traditional educators and society in general that "flexible delivery" is positive and necessary. If you think these two sound okay, then I'll ask others which they'd prefer.</p> <p>Thanks a lot,</p> <p>Jonathan P.</p>	<p><b>Comment:</b> Why does he feel the need to welcome? Who is he speaking to? Someone he feels unable to address directly BUT see next para</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> So he is obviously talking to a specific individual and in an inclusive way BUT he can't address them by name... very de-personalised</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> Again, no names</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> Deferring..</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> This is a public board so all will see (have seen) this exchange but he uses the f2f mode of 'I'll ask the others' who don't actually [online] need to be asked</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> Letter writing norm</p>
Dialogical Dance	25/11/02  1636	<p>Hello All,</p> <p>I agreed with what many of you had said before regarding "A good posting is...", and now as we are past the second week of the dance, I wish to make a conclusion.</p> <p>As we've gotten into the "dancing", I can see how some posts are like "The lead" in the footwork and some are like "follow up" steps. Without both, our discussions would be nonproductive.</p> <p>Basically what I'm saying, is that there are two general kinds of posts to a forum, which stimulate productive dance. One would be, those initial posts wherein a thought provoking question or idea is posed that leads to much fruitful discussion and sharing of opinions. The second would be the posts giving comments, sharing opinions, and questioning of the questions, that follow such initial posts. If these "lead steps" and "follow up steps" are well mastered and orchestrated, we may be able to really dance up a storm.</p> <p>Of course there are other valuable postings as well, such as; sharing information, real experiences, and asking for help in areas where understanding is lacking.</p> <p>Any comments on this posting would be more than welcome, to sum up your final thoughts as well.</p> <p>Thanks,</p> <p>Jonathan</p>	<p><b>Comment:</b> Positioning? Colleague? Tutor? Very confused</p> <p><b>Comment:</b> Thanks is back....</p>

## **Appendix Two**

### **Jonathan macro analysis**

## Appendix Three

### Interview Schedule

<b>Area</b> Purpose and ideas behind questions	<b>Topic</b> *indicates info definitely required. For other optional items see next column	<b>Quantitative coding</b> All <i>possible</i> options for quant. Coding and possible analysis	<b>Qualitative approach</b> (not all questions will be relevant; wording will be amended in light of responses as interview progresses)
<b>About you:</b>  -how do the students 'quantify' themselves?  -how do they visualise themselves/present themselves to others?	*Age?  *Nationality?  *Preferred language?  Other: *Gender	1=under 20; 2=20-29; 3=30-39; 4=40-49; 5=over 50  1=Aus; 2=non-Aus specify: _____  1=AusEng; 2=EngnonAus; 3=nonEng specify: _____  1=male; 2=female	Which country do you come from? Where do you feel most at home? Has that always been the same? (why/why not?) Were you studying in an Australian class? Were your classmates Australian? Did it feel like an Australian class?  What is your preferred language? Is this the language you speak at home? What other languages do you speak?  (How) does language effect your learning on line? (How) did your language preference effect your decision to learn online?  Was this a mixed gender class? (How) did gender make itself apparent? Can you give some examples?

<p><b>Background:</b></p> <p>What are the students roots - their version of their:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- learning history</li> <li>- professional background</li> <li>- experience of OL</li> <li>- experience of previous distance &amp; OL learning</li> <li>- attitudes to non-f2f learning?</li> </ul> <p>Attempts to highlight areas of 'difference' not immediately apparent via usage and message data and stats.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• *Previous qualifications?</li>   <li>place and</li>   <li>language of study</li>   <li>• *Previous subject/discipline</li>   <li>• *Previous online experience</li>   <li>• *Previous VLE</li>   <li>*Previous experience of distance/self-paced study (not online)</li> </ul>	<p>1=cert/dip; 2=u/g; 3=p/g cert/dip; 4=masters; 5=PhD or above</p> <p>1=Aus; 2=EngnonAus; 3=nonEngnonAus (Specify:_____)</p> <p>1=AusEng; 2=other Eng; 3=nonEngnonAus</p> <p>1=educ; 2=arts; 3=socsci; 4=softsci; 5=hardsci; 6=other</p> <p>1=VLEany; 2=nonVLEany</p> <p>1=USQ; 2=VLE-AusnotUSQ; 3=VLE-EngnotAus; 4=other e.g. mixed-mode</p> <p>1=USQ; 2=AusnotUSQ; 3=VLE-Eng-med; 4=non-Eng-med (specify:_____)</p>	<p>Are/were you taking this course as part of a wider programme? Have you studied at this level before?</p> <p>Have you studied in Aus/in English before? Where?</p> <p>What were the languages of instruction of previous courses?</p> <p>Have you taken other education courses before? What subjects did you study before?</p> <p>Tell me about your previous online experiences How were they for you? How did they help you prepare for this online learning?</p> <p>How was your last online experience different from this one? Which parts of the experience worked best for you? What was difficult? Which areas of the online environment were most useful? Did you prefer the same areas this time? Why (not)? Any aspects that seemed not to 'make sense'?</p> <p>What other distance study have you done? How was it for you? Can you compare the two experiences? What makes one or the other better for you? Why?</p>
<p><b>Attitudes:</b></p> <p>Attitudes to <b>present</b> learning choices and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• *Reason for choosing online</li> </ul>	<p>1=done before 2=wanted to try 3=only availonline 4=other (specify:_____)</p>	<p>How did you come to choose the online option? Positive choice? Only option?</p> <p>Would you consider yourself an independent learner? Did this help/hinder your online learning experience?</p>

options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Met expectations? Why/why not?</li> <li>What good/bad? Why?</li> <li>Do again?</li> </ul>	1=yes 2=no (specify: _____)  1=yes; 2=no	Did you know anyone who had learned online before you went online to study? How did you locate information about learning online?  Did you have expectations about how it would be? From where? How did it rate compared to what you expected?  What were good parts? Bad parts? Why? How would you describe the overall experience? How would you advise a friend who wanted to learn online? How would you feel about another online course? Anything you wouldn't want to do online?
<b>Platform behaviour:</b> Students views of behaviours about which we have stats from the 'impartial' platform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>*Areas used and why</li> <li>Likes/dislikes? Why?</li> </ul> Other online resources	1=content; 2=comms; 3=student; 4=support  Ranked useful as: a)____ b)____ c)____ d)____	Were you aware of feeling more drawn to some areas of the platform than others? How did you choose areas to use? Were the resources user-friendly? How did you find what you needed?  How did you study the materials - sequentially? randomly?  Navigating the site - how was it? What ideas do you have for improving this? --- Side issue re costs of online time --  Did you use other online resources? How did they rate compared to the course material/resource?
<b>Interaction:</b> What is interaction for these students?  Do they see OL as interactive?  Do they want/need interaction (ref. Usages prefs.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interactive? (this course)</li> <li>*Interaction necessary?(for you)</li> <li>Comparison with:</li> </ul>	1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat  1=yes; 2=no 3=somewhat	Some call online learning interactive - would you? Why (not)? Was this course interactive? What was the purpose of the discussion boards?  Is interaction necessary for learning? For you? Why (not)? What would be interactive? And purpose for it? What does interaction do for you?  How does interaction in this course rate with previous experiences of online?



	a) other online b) other distance c) face-to-face	1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat 1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat 1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat	What is different/same/better/worse? ▪ ditto ▪ ▪ ditto ▪
<b>a) content</b> Expectations of students vis-à-vis the 'meat' (content) they get to work on  Do they want /expect practical content and activities (i.e. work related) or academic content and activities?  Is content helpful or do they want tools or ideas or other things?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As expected?</li> <li>Understood?</li> <li>Relevant (to working context)?</li> <li>Helpful?</li> </ul>	1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat 1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat 1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat 1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat	What kinds of content did you feel you needed/wanted? Was this what you got? How did what you got affect your learning?  How clear were the materials? How, for you, was the language that was used? Did you need/were you able to get problem issues/terms explained? How? How was the balance of words and images?  How did the materials relate to your working context?  Were the materials useful for your context? What would have made them more useful?  Were the materials helpful to your learning? How could the content have been more useful?
<b>b) tutors</b> Do they want/need/expect a lot of tutor support?  Is tutor support important?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enough?</li> <li>As expected? Why?</li> </ul>	1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat 1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat 1=yes; 2=no; 3=somewhat	How much contact did you have with tutors? Was this enough? Why?  What was the role of the tutors? How was the student/tutor interaction organised? What did tutor(s) expect from you? Was this what you were expecting?  How did this affect your learning?

<p>How is tutor support rated/viewed compared to other elements? Is this support offered in a collaborative way or in a 'voice of authority' way?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate?</li> <li>• Any other by email/phone etc?</li> </ul>		<p>How much off-platform interaction did you have with your tutor(s)? How did this feel?</p> <p>Overall how did you feel about the tutor interaction? Was it 'expert to novice' or 'peer to peer collaboration' type interaction? Was it appropriate?</p>
<p><b>c) students</b> What, if any, are their expectations from other students?</p> <p>How far are other learners implicated in this students ideas about 'good' learning?</p> <p>How much out of platform communications goes on? Is sought? is found? (How) is it valued?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How was it for you?</li> <li>• How much did you do?</li> <li>• What was good?</li> <li>• What was not so good?</li> <li>• Email?</li> </ul>		<p>How did you find your classmates? Were they 'people like you'? Did this help/hinder/make no difference? How did the interaction compare with other classes either online or off?</p> <p>How much contact did you feel you had with them? Online? By e-mail? Was this appropriate for a learning situation?</p> <p>(How) did they influence your learning? Was the interaction what you expected?</p> <p>(How) could the interaction have been made more useful?</p> <p>How much did the option to email them 'out of class' effect the group dynamics?</p> <p>What, if any, tasks did you do with others? How did you organise this interaction?</p>



## Appendix Four

### “Rules of Engagement” summary

**Subject:** --> Rules of Engagement-summary

Thank you all for your thoughts in contributing to this discussion. Below, I have tried to elaborate a few ‘Rules of Engagement’ to guide our future interaction. It would seem that we are saying:

Role of unit/group leader(s):

- should be not just ‘a guide on the side’ but, like a lantern, shed light on possible paths ahead
- should encourage the participation of all according to their needs
- should moderate, provoke, curtail or challenge, according to the need of the moment, in order to move our learning forward – maybe ‘light a few fires’
- should respond in a timely and succinct manner
- should add subject expertise and offer experiences which others may learn from
- should be flexible!

We should post messages:

- in order to give feedback and support to others
- if we have something to add to the discussion
- when we find information which may benefit the group
- if we are lost or confused and seeking assistance
- when we are seeking views on a proposition or position
- in order to increase the flow of ideas

When people don’t respond we think:

- they may just agree and have nothing to add
- they may be as busy as we are
- they may not feel they have done enough study yet to comment
- perhaps they don’t like the technology
- they may not want to disagree with us
- maybe they are just the ‘quiet type’
- it’s a pity we have lost the opportunity of shared construction of meaning

We also struggle against the fears that:

- we have missed the point
- we have offended someone
- someone is attacking us
- we are the only ones struggling
- we are alone in the universe

Therefore, we will be tolerant with each other and ourselves, assume positive intent and remember that we are all busy people and those who are quiet probably just need a little down time and are listening not ignoring us

A good posting:

- shares information
- provides an alternative perspective and is not repetitive
- is courteous and accepting of other viewpoints and remembers that words can hurt if we don't choose them carefully
- provides added value to the learning environment
- is relevant to the issues at hand
- is helpful in clarifying our thinking
- is short and to the point and keeps discussion on course
- makes its topic clear by its title
- enables us to learn from each other, across different backgrounds and cultures

We get annoyed by:

- excessive unnecessary messages which are only time-wasters and, which 'kill other people's time'
- use of boards for personal chit chat or topics best pursued by email
- closed minds

Learning is not about right and wrong and should not be a competition; it should be a negotiated shared experience

With this in mind I propose that we adopt the above as our working principles. We will allow them to guide us in the weeks ahead. Should any one of us feel unhappy with them at any time we have the option of inviting negotiation by placing a message on this board.

Looking forward to the rest of our discussions

Anne

## Appendix Five

### Message thread as displayed on screen - marked with platform/time message codes

<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; expectations</u>	P1/T1	Richard	22-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; expectati...</u>			22-Jul-2002
<u>Re: My thoughts &amp; expect...</u>			28-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; expectati...</u>	P2/T2	BELINDA	22-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; expect...</u>	P3/T3	Margaret	23-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>cultural interference</u>			25-Jul-2002
<u>Re: cultural inter...</u>			25-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; exp...</u>	P4/T5	Richard	29-Jul-2002
<u>Re: My thoughts &amp; ...</u>	P5/T7	Margaret	30-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; expect...</u>	P6/T4	AMY	23-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; exp...</u>			23-Jul-2002
<u>Re: My thoughts &amp; ...</u>			23-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; exp...</u>			28-Jul-2002
<u>Culture in a virtu...</u>			29-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Tolerance and Crit...</u>			29-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: Tolerance a...</u>			30-Jul-2002
<u>Re: Toleranc...</u>			07-Aug-2002
<u>Re: Tolerance a...</u>			07-Aug-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; ...</u>			29-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts...</u>			07-Aug-2002
<u>Re: My thoug...</u>			07-Aug-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; exp...</u>	P7/T6	Richard	29-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts &amp; ...</u>	P8/T8	AMY	30-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: My thoughts...</u>			30-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Lack of visu...</u>			30-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: Lack o...</u>			30-Jul-2002
<u>Re: Lack o...</u>			30-Jul-2002
<u>Re: My thoug...</u>			30-Jul-2002
<u>Re: My thoughts &amp; expect...</u>			28-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Dilemmas</u>			25-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Dilemmas &amp; Facilitators</u>			30-Jul-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: Dilemmas &amp; Facili...</u>			04-Aug-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: Dilemmas &amp; Fac...</u>			12-Aug-2002
<input type="checkbox"/> <u>Re: Dilemmas &amp; ...</u>			16-Aug-2002

## Appendix Five

### Message thread as displayed on screen - marked with platform/time message codes

「	☐ <u>Re: Dilemmas...</u>	18-Aug-2002
「	<u>Re: Major ...</u>	19-Aug-2002
「	<u>Re: What are your thoughts &amp; e...</u>	22-Jul-2002
「	<u>When people don't respon...</u>	22-Jul-2002

## Appendix Six/Seven

### Messages in delivery platform and time-threaded orders

**Current Forum:** Rules of Engagement

**MESSAGE – P1**

**Date:** 22-Jul-2002 00:07:00

**Author:** Richard

**Subject:** Re: My thoughts & expectations

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The role of the unit leader in discussion forums is ...To settle the arguments without taking sides. Also to provoke differing view points which may have been overlooked.

I think people should make a post when...They have an interesting or differing view to the majority of what is being said, OR when they need to bounce something around to see whether they are on the right path.

When people don't respond to my posts I think ...I'm the only person struggling with this subject. Nobody else needs to reply because they are breazing through.

When it comes to discussion boards it annoys me when ....People only reply to the same people's postings and ignore others. People just parrot what existing posting say.

About discussion forums - I am concerned that ...I don't have the necessary time to reply to all that is necessary.

**Current Forum:** Rules of Engagement

**MESSAGE – P2**

**Date:** 22-Jul-2002 11:53:00

**Author:** BELINDA

**Subject:** Re: My thoughts & expectations

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Hi, Richard:

Let me add a little to Brian's response here concerning your point: "When people don't respond to my posts I think ...I'm the only person struggling with this subject. Nobody else needs to reply because they are breazing through."

Yes, sometimes this can be a dilemma, but one of the strongest facets of the discussion forums is that it's collaborative; that is, we can all contribute bits of information into the collective pool of learning. And, while not every post may be answered, it is the act of contribution to the collective group that becomes valuable.

It may be a vestige from f2f learning that when we "speak" we get a reply. In effect, we are following the rules of social discourse and conversation. Online learning, in contrast, does not depend on traditional notions of f2f interaction -- the "nod of a head" or even the proverbial "good point." Sometimes, silence is effective as a tool of agreement. But, at the same time, I wonder if it's more that we perceive that "nobody is out there" that is the problem? What do you all think?

Belinda



**Current Forum:** Rules of Engagement

**MESSAGE – P3**

**Date:** 23-Jul-2002 01:27:00

**Author:** Margaret

**Subject:** Re: My thoughts & expectations

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Hi Richard& Belinda

I think this is interesting - I work in a traditional distance mode organisation (ie correspondence with frills) so I don't have the same feeling Belinda does about silence being warm and supporting, I feel like Richard that if I can't see a response, then there isn't one and I'm all alone.

Silence has some very different cultural values around the world, too - in some cultures (eg mainstream European) it often implies agreement, in others (eg Pacific Island cultures) it implies nothing of the sort, so we probably need to be careful for that reason too.

Maybe this is one of the differences between online delivery and face-to-face? Or maybe we just need to work out for ourselves what we mean when we're online together?

Perhaps we could see if Brian can get the people at [name of software company] to provide a place for us to put ticks or smiley faces beside a message to indicate when we agree but we have nothing to add?

[just joking, Brian].=).

Cheers

Margaret

**Current Forum:** Rules of Engagement

**MESSAGE – P4**

**Date:** 29-Jul-2002 06:40:00

**Author:** Richard

**Subject:** Re: My thoughts & expectations

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Margaret,

What you have said about silence meaning differing things around the world is very interesting. I find it strange that in real life I have no problem with being a loner and often chose it over company, yet when I comes to external studies I like to know there is somebody else out there.

It is interesting to note that our readings for this subject have stated that to develop the Dist.ED. format there would need to be more people available for interaction with students, so it is an issue that others have thought of as well.

Richard.

P.s Being close enough to visit XYZ Campus I get the feeling that [software company] are not high on the to talk to list. There seems to be some people having trouble with the new system...

**Current Forum:** Rules of Engagement

**MESSAGE – P5**

**Date:** 29-Jul-2002 06:48:00

**Author:** Richard

**Subject:** Re: My thoughts & expectations

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Amy

I too have read many of the postings and take that solice in the fact I am not alone on this issue. I believe your comment that "a lot of us are lacking confidence, or need assurance, that we are on the right track" is also true. Yet in the real world I am sure we are not this type of person, I know I am not and believe it would be difficult to teach if we were. What do you think changes us when we study in a differing style of "class room"

Richard...

**Current Forum:** Rules of Engagement

**MESSAGE – P6**

**Date:** 23-Jul-2002 05:06:00

**Author:** AMY

**Subject:** Re: My thoughts & expectations

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Hi Belinda and all,

I agree with you that "sometimes silence is effective as a tool of agreement", but I think it works better in a f2f situation than in online learning. If you read the majority of comments regarding the lack of response to a posting it seems to me that a lot of us are lacking confidence, or need assurance, that we are on the right track. If that is the case, then receiving no feedback will not allay our concerns, rather it will heighten them! I think we have to be very careful about what we post. As Margaret said, different cultures perceive things in different ways. We have to try to be as unambiguous as possible. That's my thought for today!

**Current Forum:** Rules of Engagement

**MESSAGE – P7**

**Date:** 30-Jul-2002 00:08:00 (Original: 30-Jul-2002 00:03:00)

**Author:** Margaret>

**Subject:** Re: My thoughts & expectations

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Hi, Richard -

Do you think maybe the thing about choosing to be a loner, yet when it comes to external studies liking to know there is somebody else out there is about having the choice? It feels to me a bit like the difference between choosing not to join in a conversation compared to having the people who are talking choose not to talk to you...

What you say sounds familiar to me.

Margaret

**Current Forum:** Rules of Engagement

**MESSAGE -P8**

**Date:** 30-Jul-2002 05:36:00

**Author:** AMY

**Subject:** Re: My thoughts & expectations

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Hi Richard,

I'm not sure why some of us 'change' in a differing style of 'classroom'. It could be because we are placing ourselves in a new environment that is far removed from the 'traditional' form of education we have all experienced. (Even though I have studied several online modules with USQ I still feel trepidation when posting messages to a discussion board.)

It could also be a result of the lack of visual cues from which we normally gather understanding, without words having to be said. For example, if someone says something in jest in a class we can tell by their face/actions that they are joking. But online, we can't tell unless they actually write 'ha ha' or something similar.

I think these two factors (plus others, I'm sure) can combine to unnerve us and make us feel unsure of ourselves and others.

What do you think?

Amy

### **Message synchronisation:**

As ordered by the delivery platform

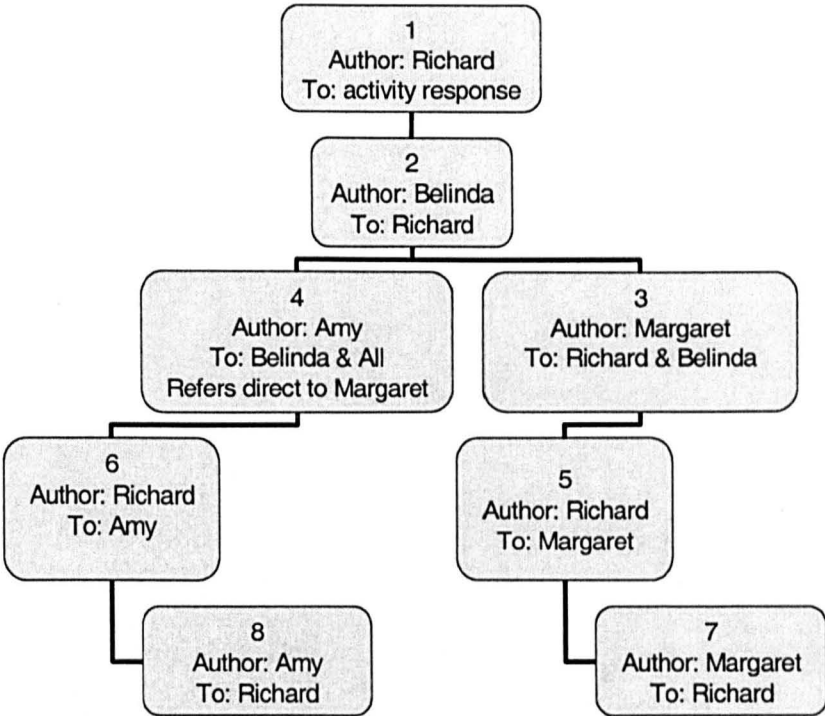
- P1 = T1
- P2 = T2
- P3 = T3
- P4 = T5
- P5 = T7
- P6 = T4
- P7 = T6
- P8 = T8

As ordered by chronological time

- T1 = P1
- T2 = P2
- T3 = P3
- T4 = P6
- T5 = P4
- T6 = P7
- T7 = P5
- T8 = P8

**Appendix Eight**  
**Message Thread Splitting**

Message thread tree – time/author/addressee





## Appendix Nine

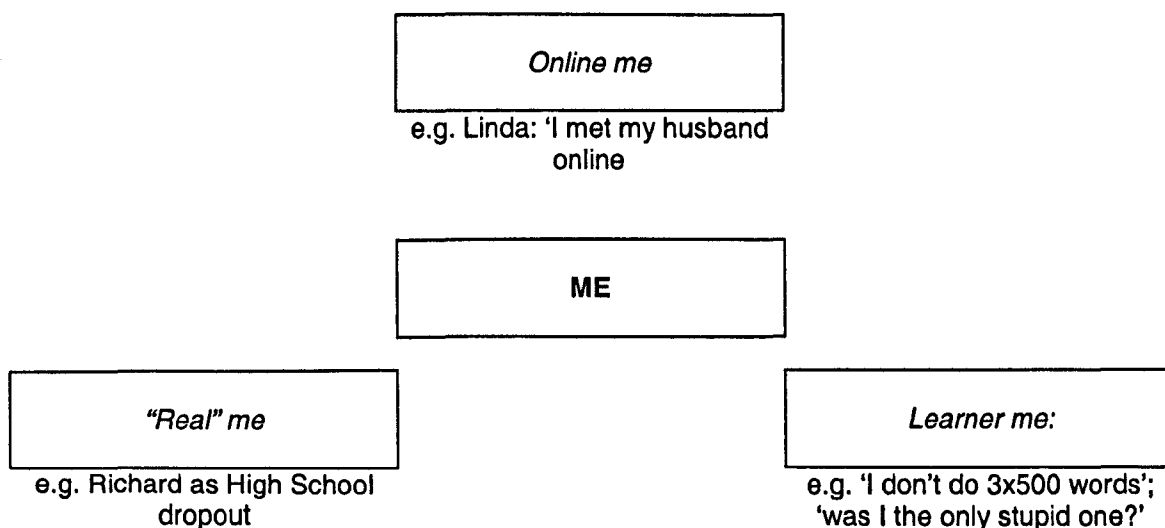
### The practice of coding and categorising in this study

The first data available to me were numeric and were related to students' use of the Blackboard delivery platform. Studying these data gave me an impression of the kinds of activities that students undertook as part of the class and generated ideas about how students went about the tasks involved in being an online student. From these ideas I was able to develop provisional categories of interest after which I was able to formulate questions for the interview schedule (Appendix Three). At this stage I also obtained permission to look at the messages that students had posted. My first readings of these messages led me to wonder about how messages were addressed and how effective addresses were in online communication. From there I began to wonder about what constituted effective communication online from a student's perspective. This enabled me to develop the interview schedule yet further. At this point I was cross referencing message and usage data and, as I undertook interviews I had a further perspective on various class activities.

I began a micro-analysis of the messages and the texts of the interviews as soon as I had transcribed the first interview. I was endeavouring to open up the data as wide as possible and dissect any preconceptions into their component parts. Within all the data sources there were many references that made comparisons between online learning and either f2f or paper-based distance education practices and the breaking down process resulted in many codes. A very small sample of these initial first level codes can be found in the table at the end of this Appendix. These codes seemed to me to group themselves together according to aspects of different phenomena, like "posting" and "lurking" and the feelings and conditions associated with those phenomena and so I created categories accordingly. There were many references – direct and indirect – to feelings of insecurity and this led me to create a higher level category 'fear'. Samples of other higher level codes are in the second column of the table below. By referring back to the instances in the data where I had identified activity and evidence of fear across different data sources I was able to compare how it was referred to in different contexts and develop a more detailed picture of the extent and characteristics of feelings of fear and uncertainty. In a couple of interview transcripts students' stated quite clearly that they were afraid of 'looking foolish' when posting messages. In another transcript the student stated only that he spent a long time polishing his messages and would then check them after they appeared online. He did not mention a fear of posting messages

directly but he did say that it must be 'quite awful' to post a message that was ignored. This seemed to me to indicate an awareness of the possibility of fear as a lived emotion in the process of posting messages in this class. In the messages themselves there were references which built on these ideas. One student, for example, commented in his first message how he felt he was in better company than he deserved because everyone else in the class seemed to have more educational qualifications than he did. He then went to great lengths to apologise in advance for any mistakes he might make in future messages. This led me to explore a related category to do with the vulnerability generated by participation through the posting of messages.

Making these cross data comparisons all helped me to map out a picture of the properties and dimensions of various phenomena. As I went on comparing across instances I used a word processor to pull together all the different instances of similar coding. I did this initially in a thematic way. At first I used a variety of themes but these developed into four principle ones: marking marks; doing education; self and other, and emotions. This also helped me to formulate the writing of the first data chapter of the thesis. I drew many diagrams, like this tentative one about apparent versions of self,



I also made and remade many lists (I had typed each of the open codes on to small slips of paper and I was able to lay these out on the floor of my living room and shuffle them endlessly to create new groupings which would help develop questions for my next viewing of transcripts and messages). Usually when I thought I had pinned down a category I would try to identify a particular quote from a message or interview which captured the essence of that particular category. Sometimes a single quote would help connect properties within and across more than one category and elaborate on the interconnections between different class activities:

... discussions are very **permanent**, once its posted it's up there, it's **visible**, it's **there**, it's like writing something and leaving it there for all to see whereas a chat it's a bit more transient, like in a class discussion whereas people might remember it, its not recorded unless people make that conscious choice to record it on a transcript so, yeah, there is a certain element of **bravery** in it (Kayli, lines 82-86) (N.B. colours added to original in order to indicate different categories)

As I worked at these activities ideas from my own experience and from what I had read previously would occur and connect with emerging ideas. I had to pay attention to how I used these old ideas and try not to let them override any feelings I was getting from the data in order that I remained aware of the influence of my own presuppositions: 'An open mind does not mean an empty head' (Dey, 1995). In the case of ideas of fear about posting, for example, I had continually to resist dismissing some student comments as overreactions simply because they did not agree with my own view. In particular I had strong views about participation and its value to distance students which originated in my own personal learning experiences. I felt that surely no-one could join an online class and not expect to participate in online discussions and yet it had quite clearly never occurred to some that interaction would be necessary. At this stage I undertook the last three interviews with students and used these to further sense-check and validate my emerging conclusions. I would offer my ideas as hypotheses for comment or would seek a fresh view on a scenario by asking the student to tell me about a process or about how a situation was dealt with in the class. Samples from the mapping of 'making marks' can be found in the fourth column of the table below.

The juggling of data round thematic categories made it easier to manipulate enabled me to identify activity-based practices of significance in the online class like, for example, the extraordinary complexity of posting messages. But, it was the core theoretical category of 'control' and it's satellite categories 'technology', 'time' and 'authority' that I was able to abstract which were at the heart of all the activity in the class and these framed the second data chapter (see column five in the diagram below). These were conditions which threaded beneath all activities and transcended being the individual experiences of individual students. At this point I drew extensively on techniques from discourse analysis (as described in 5.3.5). Some of this work was published as a journal article after peer-review – this process served to validate the approach (Hewling, 2005).



Authority, for example, underlay making marks in that it was asserted through marks: the one's that students and tutors made; the ones the University presented; and those of others that were alluded to at different times (references; previous discussions, course materials etc.). Authority was present in the ways that students thought about doing education and in the ways that they acknowledged or gave way to the will of others (as exhibited by the marks they had made or to which they referred).

